WESTERN ACTION

APRIL
15¢

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

A GREAT BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

First Magazine Publication

HAIR-TRIGGER REALM

By CLEM COLT

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 Days at Home

LARGE INCOMES FROM SWEDISH MASSAGE

Independence for Young and Older Men and Women

IF YOU are looking for a new and better way to make a living, and at the same time contribute to national health and happiness, learn Swedish Massage — a DIGNIFIED, FASCINATING, PROFITABLE PROFESSION, and one of the few still open to men and women without college training. Hundreds of our **home study graduates** either have fine positions or a private practice of their own. Many report minimum earnings of $50.00 to $75.00 per week. Some make more. H. C. Crittendon reports an average of $60.00 per day.

Plenty of Opportunities Open

This interesting, big pay profession was for years available only to a few. Its secrets were guarded jealously and fabulous prices were paid for instruction. This same instruction is now available to **you** at a mere fraction of the former price, and you need not leave your present work until you have qualified as an expert and can command an expert's pay. There is a big demand for trained men and women from beauty shops, hospitals, sanitariums, clubs, doctors and private patients. Prepare for this profitable profession **now.**

A Dignified Profession

The expert in Swedish Massage is recognized as a professional of the highest type, commanding the respect of everyone in his community. Here is a profession, now open to you, which makes you a public benefactor; for the skill we teach you is of great aid in many human ailments as well as in building beauty—it offers you position, both professional and social, it offers you independence, freedom from worry and the respect and admiration of your neighbors and friends.

YOU Can Learn at Home

Turn spare hours into money. Use spare time at home to master a profession which has made thousands of dollars yearly for ambitious men and women. Many graduates have completed this training in just a few months, but you can take your own time. It need not interfere with your other work or pleasure. All instruction has been prepared by the teachers in our well known resident school—the same material is used and a diploma is awarded upon graduation.

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These photographs are representative of hundreds received with letters of praise and recommendation. Send the coupon and we will include a booklet of names and photographs of graduates.

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Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy wartime field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs; tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time; how you get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

Big Demand Now for Well-Trained Radio Technicians, Operators

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Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government too needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men.

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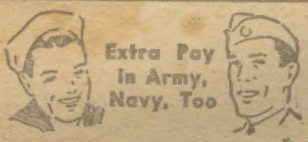
Good Pay Jobs Coming in Television, Electronics

Think of the NEW jobs that Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics, and other Radio developments will open after the war! You have a real opportunity. I will train you to be ready to cash in when Victory releases these amazing wartime Radio developments for peacetime uses!

But the opportunity the war has given beginners to get started in the fascinating field of Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my FREE 64-page, illustrated book. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail Coupon in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard.—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 4CA2, National Radio Institute, Washington —9, D. C.



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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 8 ★ ★ ★ April, 1944 ★ ★ ★ Number 6

COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

HAIR-TRIGGER REALM ..... By Clem Colt 10

Cash Gannon had a double task on his hands; not only did he have to see to it that Hackberry Basin didn't explode into bloody violence between rancher and sheepman, but he also had to solve two murders pronto!

SHORT STORY

THE WILD BUNCH ..... By Eric Thane 72

"I'll send you back to the Wild Bunch, Blue Heels, as soon as we deal with Murderin' Yount, the snake who killed your master!"

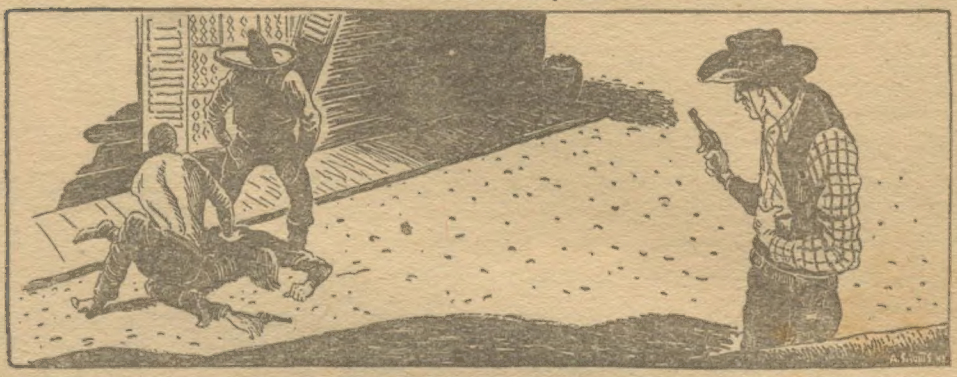
DEPARTMENT

TRAIL AND SADDLE ..... Fact Articles of the West

"COLD NERVES—HOT TRIGGERS" ..... By Lee Thomas 82

" 'BREYFOGLING' IN THE FUNERAL MOUNTAINS" 85
By Ranger Z. Robin

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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WHITE COLLAR or OVERALLS—

Which will YOU wear after the war?

HUNDREDS of thousands of white collar workers have put on war overalls for the duration. Millions of both white collar and overall workers have put on uniforms. Hosts of home women are patriotically taking jobs.

After the war, millions will be coming back from army, navy and air force to civilian jobs; great war materials factories will be re-converting to civilian production; old peace-time functions of business will be springing up—where will you fit in the situation?

If you are wise, you will look ahead and prepare. You will not wait on chance. You will analyze the probable conditions in peace employment, decide where your likes and aptitudes fit best, and get ready. You will decide whether your best opportunities lie in production or office or store. You will determine whether you wish to work for someone else or develop a business of your own. You will train now to be above the average and, therefore, surer to get the opportunity you want after the armistice.

Nor will you wait very long. Nobody knows when this war will end or how soon this problem will hit you in the face.

We Can Help You Decide

If you have some question either about postwar opportunities or about your own fitness for some particular one, probably we can help you. In our 34 years, over one million adults have enrolled for our training, we have built training courses for many major fields of commerce and industry, and we have gathered a wealth of information about job opportunities and requirements. That information is at your service.

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And when you have decided what field of work offers most to you for a life career, we can help you prepare for it—quickly, economically, thoroughly, in your spare time and without any interference with your present work—if it is in the list below. A 48-page booklet on the field of your choice, discussing the field and our training for it, has been prepared to help answer your questions. The coupon below or your letter will bring it to you, without cost or obligation.

Do not delay. Whether the war lasts six months or three years now is the time to make sure your preparation for postwar success shall not be "too little and too late."

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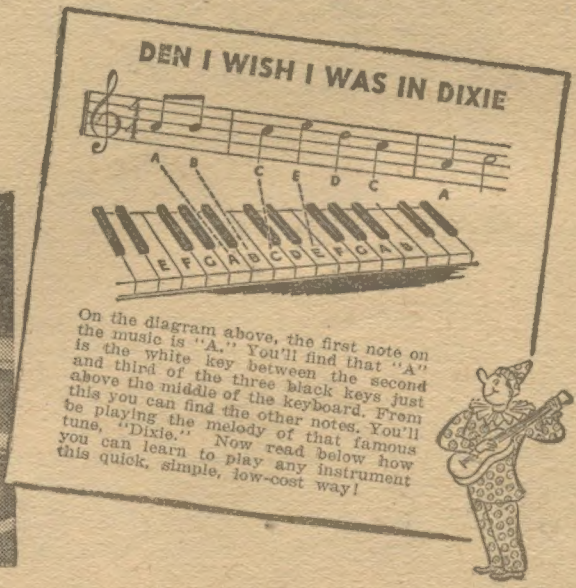
—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



THINK OF IT! Music Lessons For Less Than 7c a day and you learn right at home, this easy short-cut way

IF you are anxious to learn music but hesitate because you think it is too difficult, just follow the simple instructions in the panel above. You'll be surprised to discover that it is easy as A-B-C to learn to play, right at home, without a private teacher, by this remarkable short-cut method.

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Remember, you need no special talent to learn this up-to-date way. And no matter which instrument you choose, the cost averages less than 7c a day. That covers everything . . . printed lessons, sheet music and our Personal Advisory Service . . . no extras of any kind!

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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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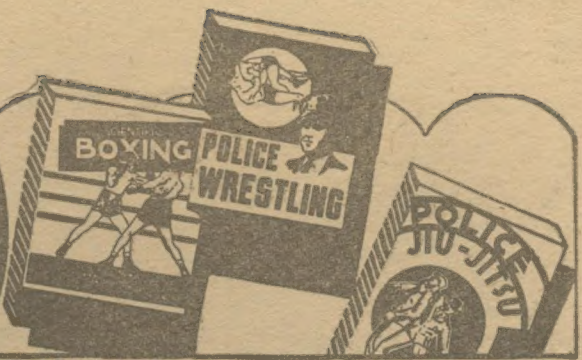

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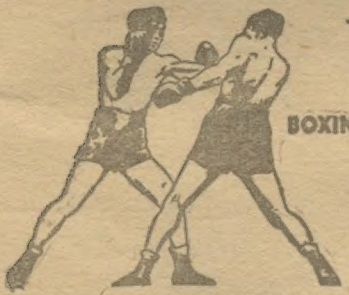

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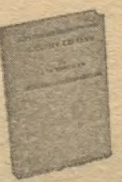

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Now—do you know how strong just one horsepower is? If you could lift 550 pounds just one foot in one second, you'd be wearing one horsepower. Only very few men have developed such prodigious strength. Arthur Saxon—probably the strongest man who ever lived—lifted 430 pounds over his head from the floor. Louis Cyr, the famed Canadian woodman lifted 550 pounds a few inches off the floor with one hand, and became famous.

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These remarkable instructions, based on Bob Hoffman's years of successful experience, take you up from scratch—through nutrition and rest and breathing, through the thorough development of all your muscles to as near perfection as you can reach. Then you will have power beyond your wildest dreams. Your whole body will have acquired enviable form. You will have added inches to your chest, have wind and stamina, powerful lungs, a stronger heart. You will glow with health and sparkle with vitality and virility. Your mind will be quick and alert. Your movements will be faster, surer. You will have tremendous confidence in your ability to do things—AND—you will win the admiration of all.

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- ☐ SECRETS OF STRENGTH AND DEVELOPMENT $1.98
- ☐ THE BIG CHEST BOOK $1.98
- ☐ THE BIG ARM BOOK $1.98
- ☐ Enclosed find $..... in full payment.
- ☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $..... plus postage.

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Gannon's lashing fist took Autwine flush upon the jaw . . . sending him reeling through the door to a skinning sprawl on the packed abode of the yard.

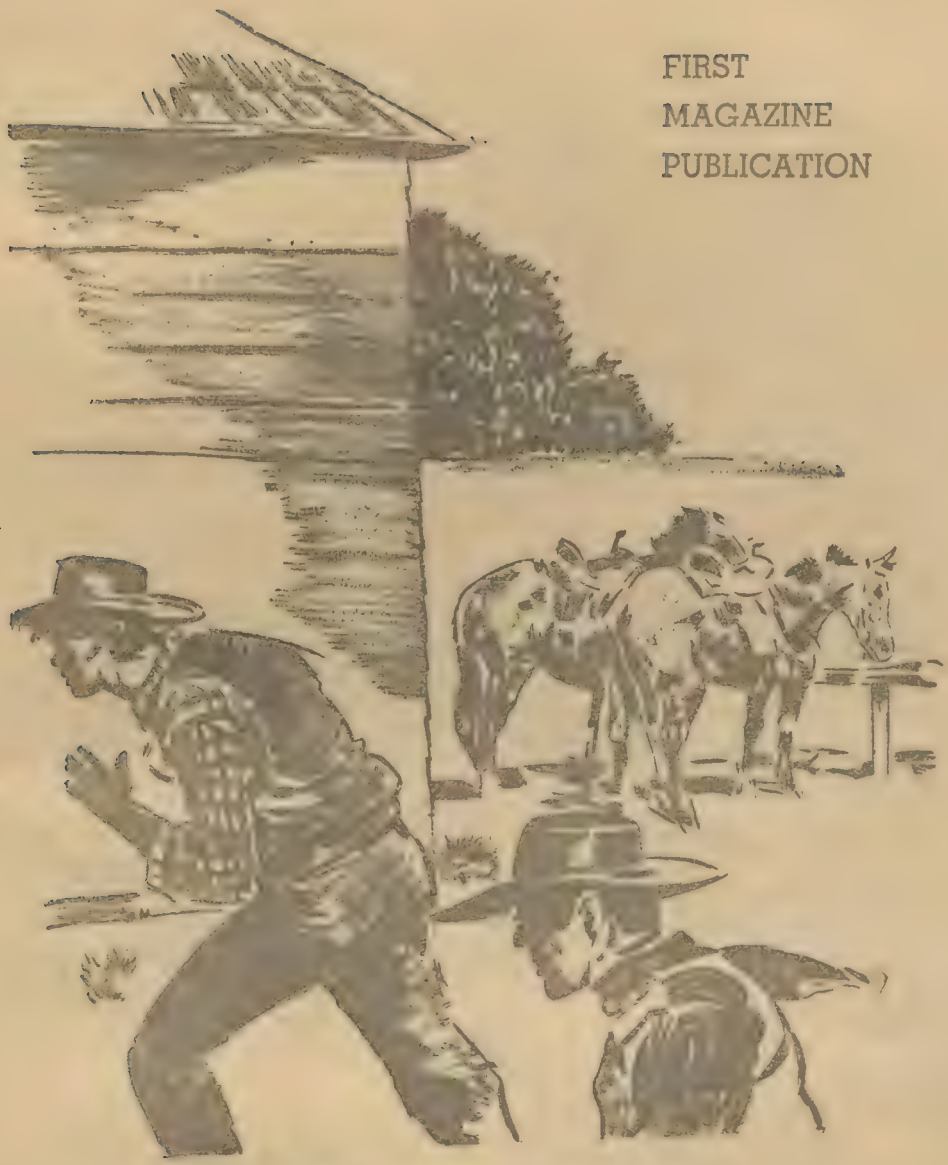
HAIR-TRIGGER • REALM •

"Sheep" was a fighting word in Hackberry Basin and the country was ready to explode into bloody violence at the drop of a hat. And "Cash" Gannon, sent in to maintain law and order, had to solve a double murder, as well as keep the peace!

CASH GANNON, newly-appointed sheriff of Gila County, kneed his horse from the trail and stopped.

It was a starless night and blacker than hell on holiday.

Kind of sounded like that fellow up ahead was in a whale of a hurry. Usually a man didn't push a bronc



FIRST
MAGAZINE
PUBLICATION

A Two-Fisted Complete Action Novel

By CLEM COLT

(author of "The Smoke-Wagon Kid," "Cherokee Strip," etc.)

like that without he was hunting a sawbones or a sheriff.

Cash's grin was a little twisted. The past eight days had shown him that men in this country didn't hunt sheriffs. Round here men had a habit of ironing their own troubles out. They didn't ask for other help—or want it. This was gun country. 'Hair-Trigger Realm' was the name outsiders gave to Hackberry Basin.

That rider, Gannon thought, listening to the onrushing rataplan of hoof sound, was probably some fool cowhand with a load of liquor under his belt.

Kneeing the roan back into the trail he held a hand up, forgetting that in this swirling gloom the fellow would do well to make him out, let alone his hand.

"Hold on there!" he hailed, lifting up his voice.

The rider pulled to a slithering stop, slamming his bronc back on its haunches. Came the rasp of steel on leather and a pale glint blossomed at the rider's middle.

Cash knew he had a gun out, covering him. But the knowledge meant little; likely he would have done the same had someone stopped him on a lonely trail at a time like this. With the things that were building up in Hackberry Basin, a man would be a fool who did not take this caution.

He said easily, "Just a second, pardner. I'm wonderin' if you could put me right? I'm looking for the Box O D."

Again the silence gathered. Only the occasional creak of riding gear disturbed it. Cash could feel the fellow studying him; trying to make him out.

The trail was a dim vague ribbon curling from the curdled dark and returning swiftly into it beyond the motionless rider. Metal still loomed coldly from the shadows piled about the fellow's middle. But Cash had no fear the man would shoot—at least not without provocation. Only a fool would gun a man without good reason. Even in Hackberry Basin.

He explained, "I'm a stranger round this country."

The man appeared to be considering. "Yes," he said at last, "I guess you are." He let the stillness gather. After a bit he said abruptly, "You're inquirin' the way to King Jordan's spread?"

"That's right. The Box O D."

"Didn't think he was puttin' on any gunslammers," the man said gruffly.

"He's not, if you're meanin' me," Gannon answered. "He doesn't even know me—"

"Then you'd better not go out there. This country's 'bout due to blow the lid off. Say!—you ain't a sheepman?"

Gannon said, "Nobody ever called me one."

The rider let his breath out. The pale glint disappeared from before his belt. "My advice to you, then, hombre," he murmured softly, "is to turn that nag about an' head back where you came from."

"Can't see it that way."

"'Fraid you wouldn't. Well, I warned you. It's your back. An' it's your briskit, too, I reckon. Fools bust in where angels couldn't be hired to tread. Just stick to this trail an' you'll get there."

With a quick sure motion he wheeled his bronc from the path and went larruping off.

Cash Gannon sat there thoughtfully.

It was a long time before he sent his horse ahead.

WHEN he reached it, the Box O D was dark and silent, gaunt lines of deeper murk against the bulking shadows. It must have been around ten o'clock, but there was no light showing. Not even from the ranch house.

Gannon, surveying the place a little curiously, decided everyone must have gone to bed.

And still he half expected to hear a hail come pelting from the darkness as he led his roan to the kakpole, stripped the saddle from the tired animal and turned it into the corral. There were other horses there, but not a great many.

He turned his steps toward the bunkhouse, packing his bed roll over a shoulder. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' had always been his motto. If he could find an empty bunk, he'd turn in, too. He guessed his business could just as well wait until morning.

He entered the bunkhouse and struck a match.

He was just a little surprised. Plenty of room in here, all right. Not a bunk was occupied.

He stood there staring somberly, the matchlight jumping up the shadows, playing across his craggy features, lighting up the stiff flat planes of his high cheekbones, pulling into

clear relief the odd attractiveness of his browned face.

He was alone in the place—definitely. And it wasn't likely there was anyone at the ranch house, either. What was going on round here that could have pulled them all away? This was headquarters for the biggest ranch in the Basin—one of the largest in the whole Southwest. King Jordan could scrawl his name in seven figures without a question raised.

But there was no getting around it. The ranch was deserted. Could something have happened since he left the county seat? Had some fool touched a match to the powder keg that was this Basin?

Gannon did not know.

He only knew that no longer had he any wish for sleep, weary though he was. Long hours of saddle-slicking didn't count against the mystery of these deserted buildings. Something was very wrong here—he could feel it in his bones. That wind soughing through the pines was whispering it.

He tossed his bed roll on a bunk, crushed the match's flame with his fingers and strode outside. He bent his steps toward yonder house, his spurs dragging out a dismal tinkle as he crossed the yard.

He found a chair in the veranda's gloom, dropped into it, tilting it back against the wall, hooking his spurs in one of its lower rungs.

He rolled a smoke, licked it and snapped another match alight. He inhaled deeply, pulling great drags of the soothing smoke down into his lungs. Seemed likely that one of these Basin outfits was holding a hoedown. That might account for things. It was the only possibility he could think of that would account for the emptiness of these buildings. If gunsmoke trouble had broken, he reflected, somebody would have been left to hold the place down. One man, anyway. Probably more.

But if there were no trouble now, there would be soon enough.

Gannon was aware of that. It was the reason he'd been so suddenly appointed to supersede Bill Gowerly, the former incumbent of the sheriff's office. Politics had put Bill Gowerly in; a gubernatorial order had jerked him out. Joe Blanford wasn't taking any chances. If he ever put the state militia into Hackberry Basin he was done as gubernatorial timber from then on out!

GANNON could feel the crinkle of the Governor's wire in his pocket now. He knew every word of it by heart. Brief and to the point, it read: *If range war starts in Hackberry basin you can hunt for another job. Get down there and throw a spoke in the works or you know what. Blanford.*

Gannon's lips screwed down to a thin white line.

He knew what, all right.

When Joe Blanford said a thing he meant it.

It was all the fault of those goddam sheep Tulare was shoving into the country. Tulare was responsible. Gannon would like to have wrung his neck! The man was crazy to think he could pile those sheep in here without a fight. This Basin would go hog-wild!

Probably Tulare didn't give a damn. Gannon began recalling other things the sheepman had done. They seemed to point to that conclusion. The fellow had shoved sheep onto West Texas land that had been cow country as far back as the memory of the oldest inhabitant. He had wrested grass from cattlemen in California. He had ruined a range in Colorado. Every place his name was mentioned cowmen started cursing.

This Tulare was no common sheepman—no more than his herders were common herders. In the main they were big Chihuahua Mexicans; gaunt, sunscorched and saddle-whipped. A fighting breed who would unlimber guns at the drop of a hat.

And Tulare was going to drop one in Hackberry Basin.

It would be a smoky occasion, all right. The only ones who had any doubt of this were Gannon and the Governor. Big Joe had nailed his bets on Gannon, and his language had made it pretty clear Gannon had better win. Or else—

Gannon had no desire to consider that alternative. Blanford had enough on him to hang him!

He struck a match and looked at his watch, eyes idly tracing the little design in brown enamel decorating a floorboard near the door. It was like a heel mark with a V bit into the flat part. He looked at his watch again. Pretty late. No sense sitting here all night. What he had to say to Jordan would be just as unpleasant tomorrow.

He sent the butt of his smoke pinwheeling through the night and started for the bunkhouse.

He came out of slumber to the hollow booming of horses' hoofs on the plank bridge crossing Tonto Creek. It was the Box O D bunch getting back. He could hear them spilling into the yard. The night had taken on a grayness that made him realize dawn was close.

Hell of a time to be pulling in, he thought; and snuggled appreciatively in his blankets.

But he did not get back to sleep.

He could hear them pulling the gear from their tired broncs. He caught the squeal of the corral gate. Heard the approaching clump of booted feet, and a mutter of conversation through the tinkling of dragging spur chains. Then abruptly some damned fool began laughing like an idiot. A chorus of guffaws joined him.

A yell from the house sailed across the yard. "Autwine!"

There could be no mistaking the urgency of that voice. The crunch of bootsteps stopped. A man said, "Yeah?"

"Come up here—quick! The bunch of you!"

He could hear them wheeling, start for the house. Their boots made a hurried, uneven patter.

That dark foreboding that had laid its hold on him before came surging back with a deepened pressure, pulling him from his blankets and slopping him into his boots.

HE WAS up that quick. The smooth unthinking coordination of muscle that placed him there and strapped the heavy guns about his waist showed a mind attuned to the demands of any emergency.

His examination of those guns was a thing conducted in darkness and by sense of touch alone—yet a thing both swift and thorough.

He scooped his hat from the floor and passed outside, crossing the yard's thick gloom with a springy step that left no sound behind.

His narrow eyes took in the punchers crowded stiff and silent before the house door opening off the veranda where he'd sat and smoked his cigarette. Light spilling from some yonder room showed the unmoving attention of those tall, ungainly figures.

It was an attention grimly fixed on something inside.

Then someone cursed, and Gannon was standing there behind them, staring across their silhouetted shoulders into the lamplit room.

A cold wave crawled across his scalp.

A man lay on the floor in there, making a sprawled and crumpled shape against the rug; a man whose curling hair was gray; whose face was strong and deeply lined, and just now....still and white. The handle of a knife showed viciously from between his shoulderblades.

Gannon's cheeks were stiffly slanted. The nails of his clenched hands dug into his palms.

No one had to interpret this thing for him.

King Jordan, cattle baron boss of Hackberry Basin, had cashed his chips. There'd be no talk with him tomorrow. He lay there dead with his boots on, a killer's blade buried deep in his back.

CHAPTER II

On the Bel Shay Basin Trail

GANNON stood there rigid.

He'd been told at Pleasant Valley how Tulare's flocks had come from Cypress Hill and spread across Dry Pocket Wash till all the land was hid beneath their dirty, stinking wool. The man would never

stop, they said; that already he had jumped his sheep to Tonto Creek and was shoving them south to its junction with Soldier Camp. And before he'd left the valley word had come to Gannon that Tulare's sheep were mowing the grass from Gun Creek like a plague of locusts; that if the blatting herd ever reached Del Shay, all hell couldn't keep the guns from popping.

Well, the guns would pop all right.

Staring down at Jordan's body, Gannon couldn't see much doubt of that. Only a fool could fail to read the import of this killing, of its consequences to himself, the Basin, and to his position here. The smouldering fires of hatred would blaze up to wicked fury. These creeks would run blood red and turbulence would rock this country from end to end as cowmen and sheepmen fought with smoking guns for the right to graze this valley.

These things would happen swiftly unless Gannon—as the Governor had ordered—could jam a spoke in Destiny's wheel.

And it did not look much like he could.

That the Box O D crowd would lay this killing onto sheepmen was not to be doubted for an instant. It was hot medicine, and they would spread it fast. He might as well jump his horse to the shortest cut for Mexico, and ride.

And very likely, in his boots, most men would have done just that. But Cash Gannon was cut from harder rock. He was out of a line of fighters; pioneer stock—the breed that fought at the Alamo. It wasn't in him to give up. If he went down, he'd go down fighting. But if he could only make these fools keep Jordan's killing to themselves for a bit—

A blur of movement grabbed him from his thoughts. One of that crew in front of him had whirled. His eyes were blazing; his words were ground from between his teeth: "What the bloody hell you doin' here? An' who d'you think you are?"

Every man in that group wheeled round to stare at Gannon. Suspicion stared naked and ugly from their eyes. Several hands dropped hipward to where loaded guns swung openly.

Gannon gave no satisfaction. Discovered, he forced the issue, rolling men off his elbows, shoving his grim and silent way inside; and grimly, silently stopping with the toes of his scuffed boots almost touching Jordan's body.

"Tug!" a man rasped out behind him. "Here's the stinker now!"

And another said, "I'll pot the coyote if he moves."

A man awkwardly attempting to comfort a girl whose face had been against his chest, turned from her abruptly, hurling a hot accusing gaze at Gannon; saying hoarsely, "Damn you, sir! Damn you!"

"Take it easy," Gannon said. "There's no sense damning folks till you know what the hell you're damning for."

He said that much, then raked a glance across the other two who stood fronting him. The girl was lithe, long-legged and willowy. She had chestnut hair and was garbed in range clothes that detracted nothing from her looks. Gannon noticed that her eyes looked funny; but they were not wet.

ANOTHER man made the third of the trio. He was older than the fellow who had bulged his oaths so quickly; was not so tall, but thicker waisted. His burly shoulders showed a deal of strength. His features were clean-cut and held that hint of underlying bronze that never leaves a cowboy though dry rot has claimed his saddle. Gannon guessed some change in fortune must have raised the fellow's lot. He wasn't young, but there was a lot of youth still in him; and the touch of gray at either temple but added to the strange vitality to be read in the lean-carved face. A man of striking and unusual appearance, well over six feet and carrying himself like a Spanish Don.

But it was on the features of the other Gannon's gaze remained the longest. A handsome highboned Texas face; youthful and with a sultry anger in its glance. There was

arrogance in it, too, and a touch of petulance about the lips, and a tiny black mustache above them hardly thicker than a razor's gash. The lips curled now and he said, "I'll damn when and who I please, sir. Hell's available for any who don't cotton to it; and you feel like busting a gut, drag one of them irons an' I'll cool you off for good."

Gannon looked at him. "A pretty tough monkey, ain't you?"

"I'm tough enough to gut a stinking sheepman!"

The girl said, "Tug!" and raised a protesting hand.

The older man said nothing; he stood where he was inscrutably, throwing a solid shadow against the wall.

"Tug, eh?" Gannon said quietly. "Guess you're young Tug Jordan then. I'd like a word with you."

"Why jaw with the goddam bla-bla?" demanded one of the men in the doorway. "We caught him here red-handed, didn't we?"

And another growled, "Jeez! Get a rope, somebody. Let's string the killer up!"

Gannon didn't move, but his cold eyes held Tug's glance. "You'd better talk pretty quick," he said, "or maybe you won't get no chance."

Time stretched out and strained while Jordan tried to stare him down. But Gannon's nerve was like a rock. Finally Jordan growled, "Who the hell are you, anyway?" And the words, when they came, were hoarse.

With his left hand Gannon flicked back his vest. Young Jordan's eyes went wide and narrow. "Why didn't you say so?" he scowled. And with a flush, "It's the Sheriff," he told the rest.

The feel of change lashed across the room, but its comfort was not heightened. Before, these men had been suspicious; desirous of believing him a sheepman and the killer. Now their scowls and slanting cheeks showed resentment of his authority.

But he was ready for this. He said, "Get those men away from that door."

For moments no one moved. He could feel their wills pitted stubbornly against him. He took a half step forward and clenched a fist. Jordan's cheeks went a little pale and a film crept across his gaze. He licked his lips. "Autwine—you heard the Sheriff, didn't you?"

The older man sent a hard look raking across the porch.

The punchers cleared off with sullen looks and a very plain reluctance. Gannon could hear them muttering as they crossed the yard. "Close the door," he snapped at Autwine.

His turning look then caught the sulky brilliance of Jordan's stare; absorbed the rebellious detail of Autwine's darkened cheeks. In the girl's frankly watchful gaze he read a puzzled curiosity. There was something else there, too, but he could not make it out. Kind of looked like interest; but what she could find of interest in a fellow of his caliber was completely beyond his guessing.

HE WATCHED Tug swing his lean shape across the room, sprawling it into a chair with a careless leg hooked across an arm. Fellow would have made a whale of an advertisement for any mail-order outfit, he thought disparagingly. Jordan's ten-gallon Stet hat was the color of thickened cream. His vest and boots were elk hide, stamped with big red stars. His shirt was silk of a pastel blue, and the trousers under his black concho-studded chaps were also blue, and of corduroy. They made a song each time he moved. And the silver gut hooks he was sporting would have turned a Mexican pale with envy.

He caught Gannon looking him over and had the grace to flush. "If you got anything to say to me—" he started.

"Just set easy," Gannon stopped him. "When I have, I'll say it. What's Autwine do for his wages?"

"Range boss."

"Work hard at it?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

Gannon's shifted look discovered Autwine's lips curled in a smile. "When I have to," Autwine said, and chuckled. "Guess you'll be wanting to know about—"

"Not yet," Gannon cut him off. "All in good time. First, where have the bunch of you been?"

"Jesus Candalero's. He's been holding a fandango."

"This Candalero; what's he run? Cantina?"

"Horse ranch," Autwine said. "Roll C on Skunk Tank Ridge."

"That far from here?"

"Twelve to fourteen miles, I'd say."

"What would you say?" Gannon asked the girl.

"About the same."

A pretty voice, he thought. Kind of tired, but reminding him of distant church bells chiming. Low and kind of throaty—made you want to hear more of it.

"Who else was there besides your crowd?"

She looked a little surprised; a little resentful, too. "Aren't you interested in finding out how Dad was killed?—Who killed him?" she asked, reproach faintly marking each low syllable.

"Do you know?"

Her hesitation was brief. "Of course not!"

"Then suppose you tell me who was at this shindig."

She smoothed the frown that had started between her eyes. "Everyone, I guess—everyone but Dad. I mean. The whole Basin was invited. They—"

"Was Mr. Autwine there?"

"Of course." The frown showed evidence of returning. "What an odd—"

"I'm full of odd questions," Gannon grinned. "What time did he get there?"

"I was a little late," Autwine answered for himself. "I—"

"Believe I asked the lady," Gannon said.

If Autwine took offense, the fact was kept to himself.

The girl said, "He did not start when the rest of us did. He had some work to do and said he'd see us later."

"I still haven't learned what time he got there."

"Really—"

Autwine's words clipped her sentence coolly. "I arrived at sometime around eleven-thirty."

Gannon stared at him. "Kind of late to be getting to a party, wasn't it?"

"These affairs," Autwine said easily, "usually last all night. I'd been to Candalero's jamborees before an' couldn't see no sense in rushing. I had a lot of desk work to catch up on."

"Did you get it finished?"

Autwine laughed. "Certainly I got it finished. Otherwise, I shouldn't have gone at all."

"Take your work pretty serious, don't you?"

"I take good wages, too."

GANNON studied Autwine a moment longer, then wheeled a look at Tug. "I guess you went with the rest of the Box O D bunch. What time did you leave the ranch?"

"Around seven—though I can't see what all this has got to do with Dad's—"

"Did your Dad leave here when the rest of you did?" Gannon interrupted.

"Yeah."

"But he didn't arrive at Candalero's with us," the girl said quickly. "He forgot something and came back after it."

"Any idea what it was?"

She shook her head.

"What time did he get to Candalero's then?"

She looked at Tug. Tug said, "He didn't get there—didn't show up at all."

Gannon thought that over. It offered plenty of possibilities.

He looked at Autwine. "What time did King Jordan—Wait," he said, and, turning, asked Tug quickly: "What time did he leave the rest of you to come back here?"

"We wouldn't know," the girl cut in. "But it must have been around eight o'clock—we were better than halfway there."

Gannon considered her thoughtfully. There was something in her eyes....

He turned to Autwine abruptly.

These people didn't like his tactics, but he didn't give a damn. He was not concerned with the niceties of social intercourse; he was out to prevent a range war if it were humanly possible. Someone had murdered this King Jordan, and whether they liked it or not, he wasn't passing up the chance of the killer's being someone from this outfit.

He said to Autwine: "What time did Jordan get here; and what was it he came after?"

The range boss shook his head. "He didn't come back while I was here."

"Didn't come back?"

Autwine slowly shook his head. "I left around nine-thirty. He hadn't come back here then."

They stood looking at each other.

In the girl's eyes Gannon saw a puzzled wonder slowly darkening into something else.

The room got very still. Through that hush he caught the drum of hoofbeats; the hollow booming of them as they swept across the bridge.

There was a shouted challenge from the yard; a curse. The hoof sound ceased. A squabble of angry voices rose as, wheeling, Gannon strode to the door and flung it open.

The brightening light disclosed the Box O D punchers massed around the horseman—a burly, squat and swarthy Mexican. A swearing puncher jerked the fellow from his saddle. Metal cut a flashing arc.

"Hold it!" Gannon yelled. "Bring that man up here!"

After a moment of muttered conversation the punchers released the man. He came hurrying forward, the brim of his vast straw hat flopping with every step.

Autwine, Jordan and the girl were crowding the doorway back of Gannon when the Mexican clanked to a stop before the veranda step. He was breathing hard, but whether from the rough treatment received at the punchers' hands or because of the excitement that showed from his black and flashing eyes, would have been hard to have said.

"You are the Sheriff, senor?" he asked, pulling off his floppy hat.

Gannon nodded.

"I am Chato Amado, senor. The Senor Pritchett 'ave send me. It ees about the patron—"

"Tulare?" asked Gannon, guessing.

"Si." Amado bobbed his head emphatically. "He ees *muerto.* On the Del Shay Basin trail— someone 'ave shot him!"

CHAPTER III

Food for a Thinker

THE girl stifled a cry behind the knuckles of her hand. Her dilated eyes were very dark.

No discernible expression crossed Autwine's face.

But young Jordan's handsome ceuntenance showed a malicious satisfaction.

The Mexican's information had startled Gannon; but not so much that he missed these things. Need for detailed knowledge was in him a habit built from harsh experience; a thing honed sharp by love of life. His was a vigilance not often caught a-napping. And it was not caught napping now. Many things could have caused the girl to cry out that way; he did not know which of these things had, but he was not without his notions. Autwine he had catalogued as a cool and careful customer; and his manner now in no way changed this estimate. Jordan, like his father, was palpably a hater of sheep and sheepmen, and his evident pleasure at learning of Tulare's death confirmed the impression Gannon had built.

The flat silence crowding the heels of Amado's words was broken by Jordan's suddenly growled: "That's something, anyway!"

The stocky sheepman chucked him a hard and bitter glance. But he knew his place in these surroundings and had the sense to keep his thoughts to himself.

Gannon, raising his voice to include the group before the bunkhouse, said: "Stick around a bit, Amado. I'm going out there with you."

The Mexican nodded indifferently. He produced a black-paper cigarette

from the pocket of his shirt and held it to a match. With a final enigmatic glance at Jordan, he strode back to his horse and pulled himself into the saddle. He displayed no interest in the ugly looks directed at him by Jordan's scowling punchers.

"I ain't satisfied with this killing," Gannon said to Tug.

He would have said a little more, but Tug cut him off with a brittle laugh. "If you think I am," he growled, "you're a damned sight crazier than you sound! One of them stinkin' sheep-lovers pulled this trick, an' by Gawd I'll smoke him out if we have to fog the bunch of 'em!"

Gannon said, "You'll leave those sheepmen strictly alone," and watched a look of turbulence beat across young Jordan's cheeks. "I mean what I say," he warned. "There'll be no range war in Hackberry Basin."

"Pretty hard thing to prevent, don't you reckon?" Autwine asked. "These Basin outfits are pretty well lathered up already, and when the news of—"

"If you got half the sense I think you have, you'll advise Jordan here to keep this killing quiet for a while. Range wars, all other angles off the slate, are damned expensive business. Furthermore—and you better think this over carefully—the first whippoorwill I catch letting off a gun around here is going to catch everything I can give him."

"Sheepman, are you?" Jordan sneered.

"Just remember what I said," Gannon told him quietly. "Somebody seems to be bent on starting trouble. King Jordan's dead and Tulare's dead. We don't know which died first. There's a lot of possibilities wrapped up in that. You want to think them over."

You could see the angry defiance that was quivering on Tug's taut lips. But he didn't get the floor. Autwine said with an appearance of reflection, "Looks like the Sheriff's dead right. No sense barging into something till we find out where we stand. This looks like the usual sheep an' cattle stuff—but there's a possibility it ain't. There might be a third element here; some bunch that's wantin' sheep an' cattle to tangle for their own ends — someone that's figurin', after the smoke's been cleared away, on takin' over this range. Mebbe we better bide a spell an' see which way the wind blows."

Gannon nodded. Tug wasn't

GANNON nodded. Tug wasn't liking this, but he wasn't committing himself one way or another. And a stubborn conviction still controlled the slant of his highboned cheeks.

Gannon slapped the dust from his hat and put it back on his head. He asked, "You got a couple punchers you could spare, Autwine?" And when the range boss nodded, "Better have them make the rounds then. I'll be back tonight and I want to see all the owners that were at Candalero's fandango—includin' Candalero himself. Have 'em over here."

He crossed the veranda and stepped inside the house again. Lounging against the wall, and fully aware that Tug had followed him to the door and was watching sullenly, he rolled a smoke while squinting thoughtfully about the room. He let his glance rest longest on the dead man's boots and on the rug.

He turned abruptly, meeting Tug's curious stare.

He brushed past the man with a "See you later," and headed toward the corral. A quick step turned him as he was lifting the rope from his saddle. It was the girl, and the queer look he had seen before still worried the depths of her eyes. They were lovely eyes, he noticed; intelligent, golden-brown.

"Have—have you any idea who did this thing?"

"It's a little early, ma'am, to be makin' guesses."

"Still. . .you must have formed some sort of notion—"

"Sorry, ma'am. There are too many angles to this thing to be forming any notions at this stage." He studied her keenly. "I suppose you'd want to help if you could?"

"Of course." She looked at him expectantly.

"The most important thing to a quick solution of this business now is to keep your brother from going off half-cocked. Naturally he attributes this knifing to the sheep crowd; he'd like to take these punchers an' jump to the warpath. He'd get plenty of help, too, if he tried it. Cowmen are a hot-headed lot soon's some darn fool yells sheep! They'd buckle on their guns, an' first thing you know there'd be a range war goin' full blast. There'd be a lot of fellows killed. There'd be some crippled. Half the valley graze would be ruined, an' probably several outfits burned. And when you got all through you'd be no closer to knowing who killed King Jordan than you are right now. I don't want this range war started. If you can do anything with your brother, ma'am, I'll appreciate it."

She gave him a long quiet scrutiny. "I'll do my best," she said.

He watched her as she crossed the yard, her long legs swinging with an easy stride, slender body swaying gracefully. The rising sun put glints of burnished copper in her hair. A fine, proud girl, with courage and spirit marking every inch of her splendid body. Watching her that way stirred some latent hunger that he hadn't known was in him.

Still thinking of her, he shook out his loop and moved toward the corral gate. But just as he was preparing to duck between its bars, Tug Jordan came stamping up and laid a rough hand on his arm.

"What did Tennessee want with you?"

"Tennessee?"

"My sister, damn you. Don't look so blinkin' innocent!"

"Why," said Gannon, observing the hot suspicion in Tug's flushed countenance, "I don't know that she wanted anything that could prove of interest to you."

He shook the fellow's hand from his arm.

But Tug wheeled after him. "You leave Tennessee clean out of this," he muttered. "She was up to Candalero's an'— You keep plumb away from her," he threatened, "or you'll get your clock fixed so it won't run good!"

Gannon turned and looked at him, shrugged, and ducked between the corral bars. He shook his loop out, giving Jordan a quick hard grin. "It's a thought," he said. "An' I'll be keepin' it in mind."

AS THEY rode along the old Chalk Mountain trail, Gannon found that he had plenty to think about. Questions pawed his mind, hunting answers that took a deal of finding.

Rolling a smoke, he took a sidelong glance at Amado. He wondered who this fellow Pritchett was. Probably some ignorant camp mover. And yet. . .

He cupped a match about his cigarett. That smoke was good. It soothed him, picked up his faculties and released the kinks from weary muscles.

He looked at the Mexican again. A stolid, plodding sort. His round undistinguished face had a kind of bovine look about it. But he was a fighter or Tulare'd never have hired him. Half Yaqui, like enough. Those beef-eating Yaquis were real tough monkeys.

He said, "Pritchett told you to look for the Sheriff?"

His question seemed to startle the man from his reverie. "Huh?" He looked up blankly. "You were speak to me, senor?"

"Yeah. Did Pritchett tell you to hunt me up?"

"Pritchett say, 'Get me the star packer. He's stay at Box O D.'"

This *was* news!

How had Pritchett known he would be at Jordan's ranch? How, indeed, had Pritchett even known he was in the country? This Pritchett, evidently, was a quite unusual hombre.

Gannon said casually, "How long's Pritchett been working for Tulare?"

The Mexican shrugged expressive shoulders. "No sabe, senor."

Gannon's eyes narrowed. "What's he do?"

"Pritchett boss-man."

"Hmm. Thought Tulare was bell-wether of your outfit?"

"Tulare *muerto*. Pritchett boss-man," the Mexican answered doggedly.

After that they rode in silence. Only the jingle of spur chains, the occasional-creak of saddle leather and the chirping of the horses' crickets disturbed the brooding hush of this deep Basin country.

There were so many things that Gannon wanted to know—had to know if he was with any effect to jam a spoke in Destiny's wheel. And these things kept hammering at his mind; they would not let him rest.

Why was it, for instance, that he had seen so little blood on the carpet under Jordan? A few paltry drops; just a smudge, to be exact, although the back of Jordan's vest had been stiff with the clotted stuff.

What had caused Jordan yesterday to leave the rest of his party halfway to Candalero's and turn back? Had he really forgotten something? If so, what? And had he gotten it? Or had he, as Autwine claimed, not reached the ranch till after the range boss had left?

If it came to that, had Autwine left when he said he had? And if so, when had Jordan arrived? Had the killer been waiting for him? There was, of course, the possibility that the killer had been after the same thing which had caused the rancher to return. He might, indeed, have been rummaging around when Jordan got there. Or then again he might have followed the rancher there.

But, if Autwine's statement could be believed, where had King Jordan spent that hour and a half that had elapsed between the time he left the Box O D bunch and the time when Autwine left the ranch? To go halfway to Candalero's had taken Jordan, at the easy pace the crew had probably traveled, only about an hour. A man returning to a starting point, as Jordan was supposed to be doing, and having again to recover already covered ground, should have been in something of a hurry. Yet in an hour and a half he had not recovered ground originally covered in an hour. *Why?*

Had his purpose really been, as he had claimed, to return to the ranch?

Had Autwine been there until nine-thirty? Or was he lying?

Why had the girl cut in so many times with answers when he'd been questioning Tug concerning particulars of the trip to Candalero's? What could she be scared of? And had that light he'd observed in the depths of her brown eyes been fear? Possibly it was only worry; but worry about what?

And there was that design like a heelmark he had noticed on the veranda planks. It was a heelmark; he knew that now. And he knew it had been stamped in blood. King Jordan's blood, very probably. Yet he'd seen no other marks of the kind inside the house. Only on the porch in that one place.

THERE was significance there if he could only decipher it.

This thing, he reflected impatiently, was like to bog him down. There were too damned many angles! And he'd bet a buck it all came back to Tulare's rotten sheep!

Not that he was agreeing with Tug's conception of the thing. Maybe a sheepman had killed Jordan. But to Gannon that idea was a bit too obvious; too very much like dangled bait to be grabbed without reflection. Jordan must have had enemies nearer to hand—people in these valley outfits. A man couldn't get where Jordan had in this cattle business without stepping on other cowmen's toes. One of these, Gannon thought, made a much more likely killer. Not unless Tulare'd been killed before the cowman, could he believe that Jordan had died of a sheepman's knife.

He would have to check those times. A lot might turn on who's been murdered first.

It was odd, he thought, that he had seen no moisture in Tennessee's eyes when she had stood there staring down at her father. She had a deal of self-possession; it was obvious, and pride. Yet even so, what daugh-

ter who cared deeply for a father could stand by dry-eyed—could look unmoved or with composure upon that father dead by violence?

Perhaps she'd been too shocked, too stunned or overwhelmed by that sudden death to react naturally. Perhaps the tears and anguish would come later — were possibly coming now. That forced composure, he thought hopefully, might have resulted from his presence. She might have been too proud to cry before a stranger.

But there were other things as odd, and he could not overlook them. Why had she been so swift to cut Tug off with her "We wouldn't know," to his asking of Tug what time King Jordan had left the bunch to return to the ranch for that forgotten something?

That showed a presence of mind that under the circumstances loomed a bit unpleasant. To Gannon's way of thinking, anyway.

And why had she hesitated, even so slightly, before saying she didn't know who had killed King Jordan? *Did she?* And was it this knowledge that had stifled her natural reactions?

Gannon fervently hoped not. He would hate to think of a girl like her mixed up in such sordid business. Why beat about the bush? God damn it! He would hate to thing of her mixed up in this thing at all!

But he could not rid his mind of that picture of Tug come wheeling after him; the hot suspicion of Tug's eyes as Jordan's son had growled, "You leave Tennessee clean out of this. She was up to Candalero's an'—" Then Tug had stopped, to finish with a threat.

Gannon scowled as he looked about him.

They had left the trail and were cutting through the brush. The sun was getting higher and its hot glare was like a hammer's smash. The heat and dust were choking, stifling. He dragged a sleeve across his streaming face. "How the hell much farther is it?"

Amado twisted his head. "Senor?"

"How much more of this we got to plow through?"

"Close now, senor." The Mexican shrugged. "Ten minutes, maybe. *Sabe Dios.*"

No hope of coming on the scene of Tulare's killing without warning. The snap and crackle of this brush, even without the plain-heard hoof sound, was enough to rouse an army.

Gannon cursed and drove his bronc on after the Mexican's retreating back. Well, he'd soon have a look at Pritchett. That was something!

Thinking of Tug brought up an odd reflection. There was something familiar about the man. Someplace, sometime out of the past there rose the notion that he and Tug had met before. He didn't know what gave the idea color; whether it was the man's eyes, shape, or voice, but the belief refused to leave him that they'd made acquaintance before.

It puzzled him.

But there was one thing certain. Unless he solved these killings quick and gathered in the killers, this hair-trigger country was going to shuck its irons and start exploding powder!

CHAPTER IV

And Having Writ—

"SHERIFF GANNON?"

Gannon gave the man a thoughtful scrutiny.

A big and chunky, block-shaped man who looked about as easily moved as Britain's Rock of Gibraltar. "You're Pritchett?"

The chunky man nodded. "Cherokee Pritchett is what they call me."

He wasn't any camp-mover; Gannon saw that plainly. He was used to giving orders; a cold-jawed man with a hardy confidence in his ability that stamped clearly both his pose and look. A copper-faced breed, some men might have thought after a careless look at the high, flat face, the wide forehead and smoky, sleepy-lidded eyes. Perhaps these things had put that handle on his name; but Gannon's probing look disclosed a number of elements not usually included in the make-up of a gent with moccasin blood running through his arteries.

This Pritchett, while presenting the stolid features, yet lacked the half-breed's arrogance. A cold, slow-thinking man imbued with the stubbornness of a mule. His boots were scuffed, his Levis faded; between the flaps of a sweat-streaked calfskin vest worn hair side in, a black wool shirt showed open from neck to waistband, disclosing the matted hair on the man's thick chest.

"Well, Mister Cherokee Pritchett!" Gannon asked bluntly, "how did you know that Mex would find me at Jordan's ranch?"

The man was gone, sent back to the camp by a wave of Pritchett's hand. Now Pritchett's heavy lips curved faintly. "Ain't you wantin' to view the body—?"

"I'm wantin' an answer to that question."

"Oh," said Pritchett carelessly, "I got my ways of gettin' information."

But he didn't explain the ways. And, though the faint smile still edged his heavy lips, his eyes were opaque and hard.

Gannon saw right then that he'd get little from the fellow save that which the man was willing. And his temper started boiling when Pritchett said again, "Ain't you wantin' to view the body?"

"When I'm wantin' to, I reckon I'll tell you! When was the killing discovered, and who came across the body?"

"I did," the sheepman answered. "Found poor Ed right where you see him. 'Long about eleven las' night. I'd been—"

"Amado," Gannon said, cutting him off, "told me you were the boss-man 'round these diggings. Didn't Tulare own these sheep?"

"He owned some of 'em, all right. Had a lot more on shares. But there's other owners in the outfit; it's a pool. We call it the Alamagordo Pool."

"That ain't explaining that boss-man business. You segundo for the Pool, or something?"

"Next to Tulare I'm the biggest owner," Pritchett said gruffly. "We got ninety thousand sheep in this man's country, Mister."

Gannon whistled. "Take my advice an' get 'em out, then. These cow outfits ain't going to stand for any foolishness—"

"Foolishness? No, I guess not. I heard they got a deadline. Del Shay Basin." Pritchett grinned derisively. When has a deadline ever stopped sheep?"

Gannon eyed him coldly. "I'll stop 'em this time," he said quietly. "'Cause the first damn' time a woolly's pushed across it, I'm goin' to start weeding you sheepmen out. An' that goes the way it lays."

Pritchett's smoky eyes stared back unblinking.

"Like that, eh?"

"Just like that."

Pritchett's voice was skeptical. "Must think a pow'ful lot of your ability. Don't look to me like one lone star-packer would be in any position t' do much more than bark."

And he bit a man-sized chew from a plug of black tobacco, masticating leisurely as he looked the sheriff over with an evident amusement.

Gannon's thin lips streaked a smile. "You'd be surprised what one lone star-packer could do," he told the sheepman softly. "And you're going to find out if you move those sheep any farther south."

They stared across three feet of silence while Pritchett pondered the promise in those final words.

Finally he shrugged. "I expect this is goin' to be right interestin'."

"Understand me," Gannon told him. "There'll be no range war in this valley."

Pritchett rasped a hand across his jaw. "I'm surely glad to hear it. You wantin' to see that body now?"

"Yes," Gannon said, and his face was tight and grim.

Pritchett walked over to the oblong mound that lay athwart the trail, and pulled aside the tarp.

IT WAS Tulare, all right; Gannon had seen him once before. Two years back, in Phoenix. The sheep king had not changed. The brown, beard-stubbed face looked much the same. Not even death had been able to release the bulldog grip of those hard features. All the stubborn bel-

ligerency that he had marked in them two years ago was in them still. The steel-trap mouth still wore its taunting sneer.

"Pretty specimen," Gannon muttered, bending down. "Anybody move him?"

"Nope."

"Who's seen him besides yourself an' the greaser who came after me?"

"No one. Except the killer. I—"

"Lot of boots been trampin' round here."

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"I don't know anything about 'em. Some of them may be mine; I bent down there like you're doin', to see if he'd been finished."

"Pretty dark last night."

"Yeah. I had some matches. Those boot tracks," Pritchett added, "was round there then."

"How about these horse tracks?"

"They was there then, too. Nothin's been disturbed since I located him."

"You been here all that time?"

"I been here. Was settin' over yonder on that stump for quite a spell. Smokin' my pipe."

"Made yourself right comfortable, didn't you?"

"I ain't afraid of dead men," Pritchett said derisively. "No stiff has ever bothered me."

Gannon looked up. "Who's his closest relatives? We ought to notify—"

"You'd be wastin' time. I'm all the kin he's got."

Gannon's brows came up. "You're related to Tulare?"

"Brother—by marriage. His; not mine."

Gannon climbed to his feet. He started building himself a smoke. "Tulare marry your sister?" And, at the other's nod, "Didn't they have no kids?"

"Never saw ary. Ed had a couple pretty sorry habits. Fistwork was the worst. I reckon," Pritchett said reflectively, "he beat her to death before nature got to run its course."

Gannon stared.

"An' you never did anything about it?"

"What good would that've accomplished? She was dead then." Pritchett spat, adding dourly, "I warned her not t' marry him."

WHAT kind of breed did these sheepmen spring from? That a man could be cognizant of the cause of a sister's death—particularly under such circumstances—and still do absolutely nothing about it, was pretty damned hard to swallow. That the man could leave things that way and still continue an association with the one responsible for that death, Gannon did not believe. Such a course under law might be commendable—certainly safest. But it was utterly incompatible with human nature as Gannon knew it.

He said coldly, "Where were you last night between the hours of seven and ten?"

Pritchett said, "I stayed in camp until about ten-thirty—"

"You better be able to prove it."

Pritchett growled, "You fool! D'you suppose I go round murderin' my relatives? If I'd *wanted* to bump Tulare, I hope you think I got more sense than to do it this close to camp! Why, Gawd A'mighty, I coulda bumped him off fortyeleven times in places less dangerous than this one!"

"I'm crediting you with sense enough to have realized that—to have figured it made you safe," Gannon pointed out quietly. "Can you prove you were in camp between the hours of seven and ten?"

Pritchett considered. "No, I can't. I was there alone. The men were fidgety—expectin' a visit from this cow bunch. I kep' 'em out with the flocks." He swore impatiently. "Can't you see if I'd been figurin' to snuff Ed's light, I'd have had a iron-clad alibi?"

"Maybe you hadn't been figurin'. By the looks of these tracks I'd say it was rightdown possible the killer met Tulare unexpected." Gannon looked at the sheepman speculatively. "Say you spent most of your time sittin' over there on that stump while you was waiting for me?"

"Yeah."

"Where'd you tie your horse?"

"Ground hitched him off to the left of where you're standin'."

Gannon looked. "Where is he now?"

"I hobbled him around the bend soon as it was light so's he could get some grass. I know what you're figurin'. Someone's bronc was tied the other side of them dwarf cedars. I reckon you're figurin' it was mine."

It was exactly what Gannon had been thinking. But he didn't say so. He walked over to where Pritchett claimed to have had his horse ground-hitched. There were tracks. He squatted down on his bootheels to examine them. But it was wasted effort. There were no distinguishing peculiarities revealed in the sign available.

He straightened to his feet and built another smoke. "About Amado," he suggested, cupping his hands about the light. "Where'd you get hold of him?"

He saw the momentary tightening of the muscles about Pritchett's mouth. Then he said a little thinly, "He was ridin' with me when I found Tulare."

Gannon started. "He was, eh? Why the hell didn't you say so sooner?"

"I don't recollect that you ever asked me."

The suspicious streak in Gannon was warming up. "Where were you two going?"

"We were goin'," Pritchett said, "to hunt for Ed—"

"*Hunt* for him? What made you think he needed hunting? Where was he at?"

"That's what we was aimin' to learn. You see, he'd left his camp —Amado was his boss herder— around seven-thirty, tellin' Amado he was figuring to drift down Red Rock way to see about supplies. 'Bout ten-thirty I began to get right-down fidgety; it wasn't like him to take that long for just a trip of that size. I began recallin' some of the things I'd heard about these Basin cow-prods; an' the more I recalled the more sure I was they'd jumped him. So when Amado came over to my camp askin' if he was with me, I figured 'twas high time we started huntin'."

PRETTY smooth, thought Gannon — especially for impromptu stuff. It began to look like Pronto Autwine wasn't the only cool customer in this neck of the woods. He narrowed his eyes and said, "What time do you figure Tulare was killed?"

"I been thinkin' considerable about that point," said Pritchett slowly. "I reckon I'd say that Ed was shot sometime around about eight or eight-fifteen. I'm basin' that estimate on the length of time I figure it'd probably have taken him to ride this far from camp. If you'll backtrack a bit, you'll see he wasn't pushin' his horse none."

It was becoming pretty clear to Gannon that all Pritchett's time since finding Ed Tulare hadn't been spent smoking his pipe on a tree stump. "Where's his horse at now?"

"Wandered off, most likely. I ain't taken the trouble to look. It was gone when I got here las' night."

"An it's your idea Tulare was murdered by the cow bunch?"

"What do *you* think?" Pritchett countered.

Gannon answered him with a question. "What time do you reckon," he said casually, "King Jordan got that knife in his back?"

Pritchett did not start; nor did he stiffen. He looked at Gannon steadily. "That don't tickle my humor much. But I'd laugh like hell if it come true!"

"You better start laughing then," said Gannon grimly. "We found him in the house this morning just before sun-up. He was sprawled on the sitting-room floor with an Arkansas toothpick shoved between his shoulders."

Pritchett straightened slowly, his eyes going very black. The edge of his smile went twisted. And you could see the film of caution creeping across his glance.

Fascinated, Gannon watched him tap the dottle from his pipe and put the pipe in his pocket. And all the time his eyes stayed on Gannon's

face. He said then, "I thought that Spanish monkey was holdin' a fandango at his place on Skunk Tank Ridge? What was Jordan doin' home?"

"You're pretty well informed," Gannon chucked back meaningly. "Mebbe you can answer that yourself."

Pritchett's regard was long and reticent. "'Fraid not," he said at last. "But I can tell you what the rest of them outfits are goin' to make of Jordan's killing."

"You don't have to."

"No. I guess that explains Tulare pretty well."

Gannon caught that on the bounce. "Not unless you can prove that Jordan kicked off first."

Pritchett's grin was tight. "More in your line than in mine," he said. "There ain't no sawbones in this country—"

"You know a sight too much about this country!" Gannon charged.

"We always scout a place before we bring in sheep," Pritchett said easily. Then, putting a hand down into his pocket, he said, "Mebbe this'll help you figure who killed who, an' when."

Gannon caught the ball of linen; spread it on his knee—a woman's handkerchief. It made his guts turn cold and crawl. He stared wide-eyed at the two initials embroidered in one corner.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked hoarsely.

"It was near Tulare's body. Wouldn't you say those stains were blood?"

Gannon could not speak.

The kerchief was Tennessee Jordan's.

CHAPTER V

The Heel On a Man's Left Boot

HE REALIZED suddenly that his hands had started shaking. His throat was dry as sawdust. He couldn't swallow and his heart was pounding like Hell's hammer beating grub pile. The implications of this bloodstained square linen had knocked the wind clean out of him.

It was the feel of Pritchett's gaze that brought him back.

He lifted his chin and found the fellow's eyes upon him. Far back in their smoky depths he caught the flash of saturnine humor. Clear warning struck him like a slap across the face.

Kerchief crumpled in one white fist, he straightened.

"Kind of looks," said Pritchett meaningly, "like Tennessee Jordan was up here rendezvousin' with.... Brother Ed." His hand jumped up abruptly, stopping even with a hip. "Now take it easy. Examine the facts."

"What facts?" Gannon gritted.

"The facts about this killin'. Le's say the girl goes home. She finds her ol' man—"

"How? She was over to Candalero's—"

"Skunk Tank Ridge ain't over fifteen minutes' ride from here."

"Maybe not," Gannon said, holding his temper with an effort. "But she came home with the rest of her crowd."

"Sure," Pritchett said. "I'll take your word for that. It don't change the picture any. Let's say she slipped away an' went home some time durin' the evening; you'll have t' prove she didn't if you don't like this. But we'll say she did. She sees her ol' man layin' there with a knife in his back. Right off she thinks of us sheepmen. She gets her horse an' comes larrupin' for our camp. Aoout that time Tulare comes along this trail headed for Red Rock. They meet. Mebbe she accused him of the killin'. Mebbe she just plugged him in a fury. Anyway, he drops. That knocks the guts out of her; she goes panicky when she sees what she's done. She piles from her saddle an' goes rushin' over; drops to her knees beside him—you saw those knee prints, didn't you?"

"What knee prints?"

Pritchett wheeled to have his look. He nodded slowly. "You're right; they ain't here now—"

"If they ever was there!"

"They were there, all right. I expect you brushed 'em out when you was pullin' all that Sherlock stuff. Well, no matter. She drops to her knees beside him. She sees he's dead. Doesn't notice she's dropped her kerchief. Scrambles back in her saddle an' goes tearin' off to Candalero's." He studied Gannon for a moment. "I shoulda been a lawyer—sounds pretty reasonable, doesn't it?"

"Sounds like a bunch of lies!" declared Gannon hotly. The wish was in him to smash his fists against the sheepman's face; to hammer that high flat face to a bloody pulp.

He managed to check the wild desire, though the wanting ran a visible turbulence across his cheeks. "Miss Jordan," he said very cleverly, "was on her way to Candalero's with the rest of the Box O D bunch when this bird got his light snuffed; eight or a quarter past, you said—"

"I might have been wrong," said Pritchett carefully.

"Yeah. You're *damned* wrong about that *handkerchief*. If you're askin' me, some hombre put that there deliberate—if," he added harshly, "you actually found it where you claim!"

"I found it there, all right," said Pritchett, returning his stare complacently. "An' whether you like it or not, it's goin' to take a deal of explainin'. Was I you, I'd question her—"

"You ain't," said Gannon coldly, and would have added more but for the sudden racket. He and Pritchett wheeled together as four hurrying horsemen came bulging from the willow thicket masking the bend of the trail. The sun struck dazzling flashes from the rifles across their knees.

THEY were cowmen. Gannon saw that instantly. And so did Pritchett. He said thinly, "You didn't lose much time."

"What the hell's goin' on here?" demanded the leader, pulling up in a way that laid the track of his unmoved rifle directly across the sheepman's chest. "Been a killin', has there? Who—" He broke off with a sudden curse. "By Gawd, look here, boys! Somebody's blasted that—It's *Ed Tulare!*" And he broke into a raucous guffaw.

"You find it pretty funny, I see," murmured Pritchett smiling faintly. "Well, I been tickled, too. I hear somebody gutted *Jordan.*"

It stopped the laughter of the leader promptly. Ugly looks replaced the smiles on the others' faces. The burly leader with the hawk's beak nose whipped savage eyes across the sheepman's countenance. "If that crack's true, there's goin' to be a lot of sheep-lovers' hats without no heads to fill 'em scattered round this region shortly. An' yours, *Mister Cherokee Pritchett,* will be the first stinkin' headgear off!"

"Whyn't you unloose them wolves right now?" said Pritchett, grinning. He was grinning plainly; but the smoke of his eyes had curdled, set, and filled to a hard hot brilliance.

"Why, Jesus—"

Gannon snapped forward swiftly, shoving himself between the belligerents, forcing Pritchett back. "You can drop that talk right now," he scowled. And to the cowmen: "Turn your broncs an' head back where you came from."

"Who says so?"

"I do!" snapped Cash Gannon.

"An' who the hell are *you?*" demanded the southpaw, setting hand to gun.

"My name's Gannon. I'm sheriffin' these parts—"

The southpaw snarled. "We don't need no sheriff! We can handle these wool-growers! An' we'll handle them *our* fashion!"

"Like they handled Tulare," Pritchett said.

"Why, you meechin' yaller hound! I'll—"

"I guess not," Gannon said. His gun jumped out and sprang to rigid focus on a button of the ranchman's vest. The fellow's cheeks got a little gray, and he removed the hand from his pistol hastily.

Gannon said, "You hobble your lip an' lay tracks out of here plumb immediate or I'll put you under arrest an' deputize Pritchett here to get you safely to the county seat."

"Sidin' with these sheep-eaters, are you?" The burly southpaw sneered.

One of his companions shoved forward; a little wart of a man who looked like a stunted bean and whose scalp—as much as showed, at least, beneath his shoved-back hat—was about as bald as one. "You can tell the rest of your breed," he piped at Pritchett, "that if they ain't out of these hills inside the next twenty-four hours, I'm comin' up with a bull whip an' drive 'em out myself!"

Gannon, tired of talking, let off his gun. Dust jumped from the little braggart's hat. With a squeal of fear he whirled his bronc and went pelting through the brush.

But Southpaw only sneered. "C'mon," he told the other two, "let's get out of here before we git contaminated. It's sure a toss-up which is the bigger polecat—the sheepman or that sheriff!"

THE faint half-smile edged Pritchett's lips again. "Vic," he observed reflectively, "don't seem to like you much. Kind of too bad, too, in a way. His words are passed around considerable in this country, I understand."

"Yeah; you understand most everything," commented Gannon drily, "except who pulled these murders. Which of those birds was 'Vic?'"

"One with the crescent-shaped scar across his chin; the left-hand pistol jerker. Takes himself plumb serious, I been told. He runs a cow spread in Sorrel Horse Canyon. The Flyin' M."

Pritchett got out his pipe and packed it; cupped a match above its bowl. "What you want to do about Tulare's body?"

"I dunno. You say there ain't any sawbones in this country?"

"Never heard of any. I'll take care of Ed's burial if you're through with him."

"Don't seem to be much sense in holdin' him. You can bury him," Gannon said. "Who were those fellows with this Vic guy?"

"Little squirt was Shorty Hallet. He runs the XYZ over in Bear Head Canyon. Them other two was punchers, I reckon."

"Looked a sight more like gun wranglers."

Pritchett snorted. "That's all them birds been hirin'."

Gannon watched him as he tramped off to get his horse. Big, brawny, vital as Pritchett was, there was something about the man, some latent smouldering force, some indefinable sense of the sinister that would make a fellow think twice before placing too great a credence in his word. This was Gannon's opinion. He did not like the man; and he liked him less when he remembered the bloodstained square of linen he had introduced in evidence.

Almost, Gannon was tempted to destroy the thing; to get rid of it immediately, thus leaving the sheepman's word unsupported. He could not get out of his mind that odd look he'd seen in Tennessee Jordan's eyes. How had her handkerchief come to be found beside Tulare's body, and stained as it was with Tulane's blood? Even assuming that Pritchett's words were lies—and they might not be, how then had he come into possession of that dangerous square of cloth?

The whole damned business was like a nightmare.

Why, he'd be willing to swear—or he would have been till Pritchett produced the handkerchief — that Tennessee was not the kind of girl to go alone at night to anybody's camp —least of all a sheep camp! He could think of no kind of motive compelling enough to have brought her to a deliberate rendezvous with Tulare. And even now, weighted by the evidence in his pocket, he did not believe she'd met Tulare intentionally.

His eyes showed a sudden brightness. Grinding his cigarette beneath a bootheel, he crossed again to where the murdered sheep king lay. Once more, this time with narrowed stare, he scanned what sign was visible in the hooftramped dust.

It was, he told himself, quite possible that she had come here later. After the murder was committed. And he searched diligently for proof.

When the proof was not forthcoming he fell back upon his original stubborn conviction — that the girl had not been here at all. In spite of Pritchett's mention of the knee-marks in the dust—and which were not now visible—there was absolutely nothing save that damning, blood-stained rag to prove she'd been here!

But his search had not been entirely lacking in reward. He had discovered something; things that even the meticulously observant Pritchett appeared somehow to have overlooked. In the shadow of Tulare's bent right knee he had found a perfect heel mark—a mark exactly matching the design in blood he'd seen last night by matchlight on the veranda of Jordan's house.

Nor was that all.

The heel that had cast those marks was the heel on the sheep king's left boot!

CHAPTER VI

Missing

GANNON returned to the Box O D shortly after dark. Stripping the gear from his roan, he turned the animal into the main corral, a part of which enclosed a section of Tonto Creek, and repaired in thoughtful mood to the grub shack where he cajoled the cook into fixing him a belated snack. "Them Basin ranchers," the cook mentioned sourly, "has been waitin' on you a hour."

"Too damn' bad about 'em," Gannon muttered, and went on with his eating. Discovery of the fact that it was the sheep king's boot that had been leaving those incriminating marks, was a complicating circumstance that had done little to improve the sheriff's state of mind. The muddle had been bad enough before that; now it loomed as intricate as the proverbial maze of Minos. He cursed with lusty zeal Joe Blanford and all his works.

He grunted when he saw the reluctant admiration displayed on the cook's seamed face. "Looks like you ain't got a heap in common with that fella," the cook said, getting sociable.

But Gannon went on feeding his face.

That showed, he thought, how much these back-country brush-poppers were interested in politics. 'That fella,' as the cook had described him, was the governor of the state. It was plain the dough-wrangler didn't know this—probably didn't even know the state had a governor. But he'd know, and all the rest of them would know, thought Gannon bitterly, if Blanford ever had to send the militia into this country!

He forked his air-tights in disgruntled silence.

Sure looked like now that Tulare himself had been the man to drive that knife between King Jordan's shoulders. But how had Jordan ever come to let him on the place? And once on it, why had Jordan been so careless as to turn his back to such an obvious enemy?

That the sheep crowd had known Candalero was throwing a jamboree had been proved by Pritchett's words. It seemed pretty far-fetched, however, to assume they'd known King Jordan would forget something and return home after it. Unless—

Yes, he thought; Autwine might have thrown in with them. He was cold-blooded enough, all right, and they'd probably make it pretty much worth his while. Autwine might even, in such case, have fixed things so that Jordan would have to return. Might be a good idea to determine how long Autwine had been on the Box O D payroll.

These damned murders had certainly laid plenty pipe to get Joe Blanford hunting his scalp—that was one damn fact no hombre could deny! Stopping a range war under the best of auspices was not to be compared with rolling off a log; and now with the business aggravated by this freakish pair of murders, it looked to Gannon to be a task well-fitted to compete with that seafellow's cleansing of the Ocean Stables.

He became aware that the cook was still standing there regarding him. Seemed like there was something kind of screwy about the fellow's look; like mebbe he wanted to say

something and didn't know how to go about it proper.

"What's on your mind?" Gannon said irritably.

The cook rubbed his hands on his dirty apron. "Well," he said, hesitating, and with a kind of doubtful grin, "I don't know if I ort t' interrupt yuh. But somethin' you said a spell ago—I don't s'pose the paint's even dry on 'em yet; but—well, I been wonderin' if I'd be talkin' outa turn was I t' ast yuh could I borrer a couple them private cusswords you was unlacin' on that Joe guy?"

Gannon looked at the cook's red face and snorted. "You can borrow them all," he said, and the cook went back to his pots and pans.

Gannon looked at his plate and scowled.

Even if he could manage to prove Tulare had killed Jordan, he was still left with the equally vexatious problem of saying who had snuffed Tulare. All well and good to shrug and say 'Some cow-walloper,' but that wasn't proving anything. And, besides, that might not be the truth. And whether it was or not, Pritchett and the rest of those underwears would be wanting to know which cowman. They'd be painting up for war, and they'd want to know, when the war was over that they'd stopped the right bloke's clock.

TO BE truthful, he was a whole damn sight more anxious to keep them from going to war! He'd a heap rather spend his time figuring that out.

And then there was that fool girl. Why had she had to get herself mixed up in things? And why was it he had her so much on his mind? What in the devil ailed him? No petticoated dame had ever bothered him before! But this one—Lord, every time he closed his eyes he found himself fronted by her image!

It was the damnedest thing he ever see: the way she stuck to mind. He told himself he ought to have better sense. Mooning around over a skirt he'd never get noplace with—a cattle baron's daughter; he would have to pick a dame like that! A blinkin' ant admiring the cross on a high church steeple! She probably hadn't even noticed him!

And there was still that cussed range war! And in the background, Big Joe Blanford ready to jump right down his throat!

A holy mess, and no mistake!

He swabbed up the grease from his chuck-wagon chicken with his last hunk of gun-waddin' bread, stuffed it in his mouth, choked down the glass of Eagle Brand brought out by the obliging cook, crossed his knife and fork and got reluctantly to his feet. He reckoned those guys were still waiting.

It was time he got to work.

But he didn't get to work just yet.

In the shadows of the porch a slim, lithe form was silhouetted; a more solid black against the lesser gloom behind. No one had to tell him who this was. His heart was banging like a shotgun. Pattering chills tramped up and down his spine as she came toward him. Much as possible she avoided the lamp glow thrown from open windows, placing a finger against her lips to insure his quiet till they'd moved off a little from the house.

He couldn't see her very good; couldn't near make out her features. But he sure could feel her presence. It was like he'd taken a quart of mescal, the way the blood pumped through his arteries. Way he felt, he didn't give a damn right then if the Governor was going to hunt his scalp!

She said, "Was that sheepman really dead?" And, when he nodded, "Oh!" And then she stood there thinking.

Then her voice came softly, low and intimate. "Cash," she said, "who do you suppose has done these dreadful things? It's almost got me sick. I can't be alone a minute but what I keep looking over my shoulder. It's the awfullest feeling—just like any moment someone may drive a knife through me, just like they did through Father."

It made him feel real big and strong, like one of those bulls out in the pasture. He longed to put a

comforting hand on her shoulder and tell her she didn't need fear a damned thing long as he was around. But all he did was gulp a couple of times and, clearing his throat like a whale coming up to blow, say: "I don't guess anyone will bother you."

It wasn't a heap romantic, but she didn't seem to notice. She leaned closer, laid a hand upon his arm. "But, Cash! You must have some idea who did those killings. Maybe if you'd talk it over I could help. Didn't you find any clues? In books I've read, detectives are always finding clues—"

"I wisht," he said with sudden vehemence, "you could get some of them high-powered dicks to work on this. It sure has got me buffaloed! You mightn't believe it, but—" And there he stopped. He'd been going to tell her about that heel clue, and how it had been made by the sheep king's boot. But at the last second some damn-fool voice inside him cautioned, "Better not!"

He came damned near telling her anyway. It was nothing but rattleweed and poppycock to think that a girl like her could be mixed up in a thing so goddam ornery. But he didn't tell her.

HE SAID doubtfully, "If there was anything I could tell you, I sure would. I reckon you'd see the straight of it like one-two-three. Honest, though, this business has got me hog-tied; got me plumb fightin' my hat. I never see such a chisel-gutted mess! An' t' cap it all, just when it looked like I was gettin' some place with that swivel-eyed Pritchett, along comes four of these Basin cowprodders with rifles across their laps. Why, hellfire an' brimstone, it looked for a minute like guns was due to smoke right then an' there!"

"What happened?" she said tensely.

"Well, nothing happened. I dusted the little wart's hat an' told the rest of them to clear out pronto. That Rago polecat started passin' out some chin-music, but I sent him packin' with the rest. Don't you worry; I'll keep you posted. Soon's I learn something definite we'll get together an' see can we figure things out. That O. K.?"

"You're a brick, Cash. I—I sort of felt you'd understand." She put her hand in his a moment, then suddenly drew away. "You—you'd better go on in, now; they've been waiting quite a spell."

The big sitting room was filled with Basin ranchers. Seemed like every owner had shown up except Ben Kendleson who was down—of all things—with a case of mumps, and hadn't been to Candalero's anyway.

Talk sloughed off when Gannon, polished star conspicuously displayed upon his vest, came tramping in. He was still a bit flushed from that close communion with Jordan's daughter and didn't catch half the names of the men Tug introduced him to. But he saw that Hallet and Rago were among those present.

"The first thing," he said, "is to see if any of you birds can identify the knife," and stepping to the tarp-covered figure on the couch, uncovered sufficient to let them at it.

Then he froze there, stiff and staring.

The blade was gone from Jordan's back!

CHAPTER VII

"She Was Goin' Like Hell!"

GANNON swung with a smothered oath. His cheeks displayed a bitter fury and the heat of violent emotions simmered in the eyes he raked across the staring company.

"Who took it?" he demanded.

"Took what?" Vic Rago growled.

"That knife." Gannon's angry gaze beat hard against those others. "The knife that killed King Jordan!"

"You can to say it's gone?" asked Tug incredulously.

"D'you think I'm talkin' to hear my head rattle?"

"Mean to say," a rancher named Calhoun asked softly, "that you left that knife in Jordan's back all day?"

Gannon scowled, holding down his

temper with an effort. "I been a little busy—"

"Hell of a damn poor sheriff you are," Rago sneered. "I shoulda thought the first thing you'd have done would be to corral that blade an' put it in safe-keepin'."

Gannon ignored him. "Who saw it last?"

Nobody answered that one.

Gannon looked them over toughly. Then he said to Tug: "Did you look at your dad since I left the ranch this mornin'?"

Young Jordan nodded. "Sure. I was in an' had a look at him this noon. Figured mebbe I might recognize the knife. But I didn't."

"It was still in his back at noon, then?"

"Sure."

"Didn't any of the rest of you look at Jordan?"

There were grunts and several of the ranchers nodded. Kelstane Burac, owner of the Jug brand down near Dutchwoman Butte, said, "I reckon we all had a look at him most likely. Know I did. But he was turned upon his back like now. You couldn't tell whether that hawg-sticker was still in him then, or not."

Several of the others nodded.

Gannon was fit to be tied. He felt sure one of these birds in the room had lifted that toothpick, and he was damned near ready to demand a search, when Dusty Calhoun remembered, "Miz Tennessee was standin' by him when I got here. Expect I was the first one in. Mebbe she could tell you if the blade was in him then."

"That's a hell of a question t' ask a girl," Vic Rago growled. "Specially the daughter of the corpse."

And Tug grunted something under his breath and said, "Better leave her be. This thing has pretty near got her down. She needs what rest she can get. Whyn't you wait until tomorrow? Knife's gone anyhow now. Few more hours can't make much difference."

"It can make the diff'rence between my recoverin' that knife an' losin' it," Gannon said hotly. He hated bothering Tennessee about the thing right now as much as anybody else. But there was a damned good chance that if he didn't the murder weapon would sure enough sprout wings and vanish permanent. He said, "Ask her to step in here, Tug."

TUG took a half step toward the door, then stopped and stood glowering, undecided.

Autwine suggested, "Mebbe it would be better if you talked to her outside, Sheriff. Bringin' her in here among all these men—"

"Listen—" Gannon cut in curtly. "I want to find that knife. An' I ain't figurin' to leave this crowd in here alone until I'm sure one of you ain't got it on him. Tug, you tell her to come over here."

Surly stares and the resentful looks on several faces told the popularity of his remark. But with a final scowl young Tug went out.

They sat in silence then, a painful dragging stillness wrapped up in uncomfortable thoughts, until Tug came back with the girl. In the lamplight, Tennessee's cheeks seemed a little drawn and there was a kind of haggard, haunting look in the brown glance she turned about her.

"Has Tug told you what I want?"

"Yes." Her voice—that voice that had reminded him of temple bells—was listless. "But I can't tell you. Father was lying on his back and—" a little shudder shook her,—"I didn't turn him over. I couldn't say whether the—the knife was there or not."

It was a bitter blow. But he said quietly, "All right, ma'am. And thank you."

There was a dull, an almost dreary droop to her shoulders as she left the room. And after she had gone, a silence.

Gannon eyed the ring of wooden faces. There was speculation—maybe fear—going on behind those masks. But he couldn't get at it. If only, he thought bitterly, he had some kind of Aladdin's lamp that he could rub to make them disclose their thoughts.

He longed to jerk his guns and force this crew to divulge the contents of their pockets, but restrained the impulse wisely. These

men were against him enough already without building their antagonism higher. This was gun country, he reminded himself. These men were accustomed to settling their troubles out of hand. They resented higher authority; being a law unto themselves; they would submit to his demands up to a point. He had to nurse his strength, conserve it until such time as naught but strength could serve. A demonstration now would shoot his bolt.

He checked the rush of his lifting temper and said calmly: "All right, we'll waive that business of the knife. There's one or two questions I'll have to ask, though. Routine matters, nothing personal; just some things with regard to Mister Candalero's party." He let his glance play over the Spaniard's swarthy face a moment, then said, "Mister Rago, what time did you arrive at Jesus Candalero's?"

Vic Rago said, "I didn't go."

"You didn't?" Gannon barely managed to suppress the things he felt. "How was that? Ain't you fond of minglin' with your neighbors; mebbe shakin' a merry hoof an' slipping your arm around some slender waist?"

VIC RAGO sneered. "I go when I'm in the mood," he mentioned. "But I had company last night an' couldn't get away."

"You wouldn't like to mention who that company was?"

"I wouldn't," said Rago shortly; and his stubborn glance forewarned that no more was to be gotten out of him.

Gannon said, "You can prove you were home all evening?"

"I can if I hev to—but I don't expect," announced Rago fleeringly, "to hev to."

"Mister Calhoun, what time did you get to Candalero's party?"

"[illegible] I expect."

"Mister Burac?"

"About the same."

Gannon turned again to Tug. "What time did you get there?"

Tug hesitated. "Well, I didn't get there till later," he admitted.

"Didn't you arrive with the rest of the Box O D crowd?"

"No. I had to see a fella about a horse—"

"It took quite a while?"

"Well, no, it didn't. But I found the bronc he wanted to unload on me wasn't worth the lead it would take to polish the critter off. I told him what to do with it. One thing led to another an' finally he said if I'd go down to Methodist Mountain with him he knew a rancher there who had the real McCoy in horseflesh an', needin' the money, would probably sell dirt cheap. So we went down."

"Did you buy the horse?" asked Gannon curiously.

"No. The fella wasn't home an' his wife said she wouldn't let the horse go without her ol' man was around to see about it personal."

Gannon studied him intently. "What time was it," he asked softly, "when you got to Candalero's?"

"He didn't get there," said the Spaniard thinly, "till almos' morning, when the party she was break up."

In the sudden silence Gannon saw the hostile look that passed between young Jordan and the Spaniard.

"Is that so?" he said reflectively.

"Yes," said Candalero. "An' when he come he was what-you-call bleary-eyed an' full with the tequila. He was rude an' angry when his sister question him."

There was no doubt now about the surly look on young Tug's countenance. He looked as though he'd like to get old Candalero by the neck. Gannon filed the fact in mind. He said, "Got anything to say about that, Tug?"

Jordan shrugged. "I guess what he says was true enough. I was in a hell of a mood—wouldn't you have been, spendin' all that time an' energy on a goddam goose-chase?"

"Mebbe. Where'd you take aboard the rotgut?"

"We stopped by Red Rock Springs on the way back an' had a couple snorts at the tradin' post."

"Who runs the place?"

"A fence-slat named Ed Shoemak-

er," Calhoun spoke up uncharitably. "A stringy, whiny cur."

"He vouch for you?" Gannon asked.

"Say, what the hell is this—a inquisition?" demanded Tug. "I guess I got a right—"

"No one's denyin' your rights, Mister Jordan. But there's been a couple of murders—maybe you've heard? It's *my* right to check up folks' stories, to find out where they were at, an' whether they can prove it if they were."

"Then why don't you ask that spiggoty where *he* was half the night? By Gawd, there was two-three hours when nobody saw 'im around the place!"

GANNON, repressing a start, said, "I'll come to Mister Candalero presently. Right now I'd like to know if you think Mister Shoemaker will vouch for you."

"You mean about us stopping for some drinks at his place? Hell, yes! Why shouldn't he? We was there, wasn't we?"

"I don't see no point in your telling me so if you wasn't," Gannon said quietly. "Will you ask your sister if she'll come in again?"

"For God's sake! Is it *necessary*?" Tug's flushed face showed exasperated resentment. "Why the hell can't you leave her alone for a while? You ain't doubtin' she was *there*, are you?"

"Certainly not....if she says so. But the way the rest of your Box OD bunch shows, I'm beginnin' to wonder if *any* of you spent the evenin' there."

"Well, the punchers did," murmured Kelstane Burac grimly. "I can vouch for *them*. Had most of 'em workin' for me one time or another, till Box O D got ambition an' started swellin' up like a carbuncle."

A silence closed down, tight and brittle. Gannon's mind worked fast. This was a new angle creeping in; a hint of feud poison among these Basin outfits. Made things kind of look like maybe the Box O D crowd wasn't over-popular around this stamping ground. Like maybe in building up his spread King Jordan might have overplayed his hand in his enthusiasm to wear a paper crown.

It was an idea worthy of a deal of thought.

But not right now. Right now he'd better pry what he could from this bunch before they passed the talking stage. This interview was shaping up much larger than he'd expected. A few more such cross-currents brought to light might strip away all subterfuge and—the chance looked good—leave a murderer revealed where all could see him.

He said definitely, "Go get your sister, Tug," and Tug strode out, still muttering.

Autwine moved casually to the table, picked up the week-old newspaper lying there and started back past Gannon. Passing the sheriff's chair the paper appeared to slip from his hand. As he bent down to pick it up he whispered from the corner of his mouth. "Ask Tennessee about yesterday afternoon; she had hot words with King." He straightened, moved the few feet further necessary and dropped with a sigh into his hide-covered chair. He yawned and, turning several pages, became absorbed in his paper.

A mixture of emotions claimed Cash Gannon. He sat there staring into space, for a moment the machinery of his mind completely stopped. Astonishment, a tinge of fear, swift suspicion and a mounting anger churning through his blood. For a second, anger almost got the best of him; he very nearly whirled on Autwine to demand an explanation. But suspicion proved a faster growing weed than the Giant-Killer's beanstalk. It choked the impulse off and sent new fear thumping through his arteries. An obscure but definite purpose had moved the range boss to those words, and until he saw what that purpose was, he had a hunch the tip were better kept to himself. It was a situation calling for the hand against his chest until he learned which way the cards ran.

TENNESSEE came in, followed by a sullen Tug. He was plain-

ly riled and very apparently didn't give a damn who knew it. The glance he leveled at Burac and the Spaniard was filled with a sulky brilliance.

Fierce resentment of his duty welled in Gannon as he saw how tired, how alone the girl looked now. It were as though she had no relative or friend to turn to in this moment; as if that inherent pride that was so much a part of her had placed a barrier between herself and these grim men. A barrier excluding even Tug and Autwine—particularly the cool and poker-faced Autwine with his frock coat, string tie and flat-rimmed hat.

The forlornness of her eyes went straight to Gannon's soul. It awoke a nameless terror that curled about his mind a grim forboding that he could not down; a presentiment of lurking evil doomed to swift exposure.

Tug's impatient voice broke through the spell, cutting Gannon from his somber imaginings. "She's here," Tug said; "get on with it."

Gannon roused himself. "What time, Miss Jordan, did you get to Candalero's?"

"I—I'm not quite sure," she answered; "if you mean exactly."

"That's all right. No one's goin' to rush you, I reckon. Just take it easy. I know you've been through a lot of hell, an' I got no business questioning you at a time like this. But a lot may be dependin' on it. What I want to know is the approximate time you got there—you arrived with the Box O D punchers, didn't you?"

Her eyes flashed first to Tug; fleetingly, enquiringly. "No," she answered faintly. "I didn't arrive till later—about midnight...."

It was coming now, this thing that he'd been dreading. His heart shriveled up inside him at thought of what his probing might reveal. It were as though he stood on the brink of some great precipice overhanging ghastly rocks glimpsed far below, and was about to lose his balance. Intuition told him he was going to learn the reason for that brooding, haunted light, reflections of which he'd seen so often in those deep brown pools that were the windows of her soul.

He wished with all his mind and body he could turn to her and say, "Thanks, Miz Jordan, ma'am; I guess that'll be about all."

But he couldn't.

It wasn't duty that forced him on; not even the thought of Big Joe Blanford grimly camped upon his trail. It was something different; something inside him—something greater than himself, insisting that he know the truth, that he learn the awful straight of this damn thing to its final detail.

He said, "You started with the others."

"Yes."

"And left them when?"

"A little after Dad—"

"What for?" The growled words came from Rago, the ugly suspicion of the man published plainly on his face. "What for?"

She flashed him a look of defiance. "Because I wanted to stop by that nester's shack—Tim Bristol's. His daughter Polly's been having trouble with her lungs. I wanted to see how she was getting on and if there was anything I could do for her."

"You mean that nester's shack in Del Shay Basin?" Rago growled. "Is that the one you mean?"

"Yes." Her husky voice was very low.

"An' you hung around there all evening?"

"I reckon I can answer that," cried Shorty Hallet, jumping up. "I was over to Rye yesterday an' didn't git started back quite so soon's I'd aimed to. I was comin' in over the Del Shay Basin trail, headin' for Candalero's, when I seen her. Tennessee Jordan was just turnin' into that trail that passes the nester's—"

"You mean to say," roared Rago, "that she was comin' off the Del Shay trail?"

"That's exactly what I mean t' say—an' what's more, she was goin' like hell!"

CHAPTER VIII

Startling Disclosures

TO SAY that Hallet's words brought down the house would be untrue.

But their effect was very near as startling. They brought an utter stillness in their wake. The place took on the atmosphere of an arena while their import ran its change across men's faces.

"You lyin' pup!" Tug Jordan shouted. "Take back them words or, by Gawd," he gritted, starting forward, "I'll beat the livin' gullet outa you!"

"Sit down," said Gannon thinly.

Jordan paused. But the tendons stood out white and ropelike against his reddened neck. Gannon leaned his hands on his gun-butts, bending his hard-muscled body a little forward from the waist and fixing eyes that had gone stern and narrow to Hallett's paling features.

"What time was this?"

Hallett's tongue crept across dry lips. "About—about eight-thirty."

"An' what time," growled Rago thickly, "was the sheepman killed?"

Gannon said, "According to Pritchett, between eight and eight-fifteen." He gave the man a careful look.

Rago was hunched forward in his chair like a tight coiled spring. He was staring at Hallet, and Hallet was shrinking back in his seat. Rago's yellow eyes were gleaming ominously. The scar on his chin looked like a piece of paper plastered there. "Pritchett," he said slowly, "might be mistaken," and Hallett's cheeks went dead as putty.

Gannon said, "Did you meet any other horseman on the trail?"

But Hallet seemed not to have heard, or, if hearing, to be incapable of making an answer. He was watching Rago with a terrible fascination. It were as though he dared not take his eyes from the man, and Gannon had to repeat his question twice before Hallet roused himself to speak.

He shook his head like a man in a daze. "No. No; I thought mebbe the—the girl was in trouble or somethin', she was drivin' her horse so hard. I—started after her but had to give it up before I got in sight of Bristol's shack. My—my horse was pretty tuckered. I shortcutted back to the trail, completely missing that place where Tulare lay."

"Then how do you know Tulare lay there?" Rago growled.

"I—Why, I—Didn't the Sheriff say so?" He looked at Gannon appealingly.

"No," said Gannon. "I told you Pritchett thought Tulare must have been killed between eight an' eight-fifteen. But like Rago pointed out, Pritchett may be wrong." He studied Hallet closely. "You're sure you didn't go past that place where you saw Tulare's body this morning?"

"Last night? No!" Hallet could not repress a shudder.

"What time did you get to Candalero's?"

"About nine o'clock."

Gannon's heart was like a lump of lead.

It was too plainly obvious now that Tennessee had at least been close to—if not actually at—the scene of Tulare's murder at about the very time the killing had been taking place.

There was constricting rawhide about his throat and the bloodstained kerchief in his pocket was like a white-hot iron against his chest. It seemed to him that every man in the room must know he had it.

His mind rebelled against the acceptance of this girl in the role of the killer of Tulare. He could not bring himself so to consider her, and shoved the whole ghastly array of implications to the back of his head, wishing he could sidetrack them there forever.

Perhaps she had no idea who killed her father. But if she knew or guessed Tulare to have killed him, her incentive toward revenge would have been a powerful one—well-nigh irresistible had she chanced to come across him....

Gannon's shoulders stirred impatiently.

Tug said, "If that's another of your goddam lies—"

GANNON took his hands from his gun-butts; watched them ball into fists. Big, they looked; heavy, capable—hard as parfleche-wrapped rock.

Tug took a look and shut his mouth.

Gannon wondered where it was he had known, met, seen or heard this man before. It was strange, but he could have sworn this fellow and himself had met before yesterday morning.

He said to Tug, "Did your father, in building up this spread, ever antagonize anyone round here to the point of bitter enmity? To the pitch where a man might want to kill him?"

His sharpened scrutiny was unnecessary. Rago's growled, "Better ask if there's been anyone in this country he didn't rile!" was plenty answer enough.

Gannon wheeled a look at him. "Did he rile you, Mister Rago?"

"Not like he did some others," Rago grinned. "You wanta talk to Shorty Hallet if you're lookin' for information."

"Yeah?"

Hallett's bony body was scrunched far back in his chair. His hands were whitely clamped about its arms and his eyes held the bright, scared look of a cornered rat's.

"What did you have against Jordan, Shorty?"

"Might's well spill it," Rago growled. "The whole damned Basin knows about it, an' he'll get it someplace else if you ain't got the guts to tell him."

This Rago took a lot on himself. Trouble was, he was digging out facts that otherwise might take Gannon as sheriff months to get uncovered. Gannon let him go; he might make some of these hombres mad enough to spill the dirt on him if they got the chance.

"I ain't the only one," Hallet muttered.

"No, but you're one of the brass collar dogs. You an' Burac make a pair to draw to."

Burac flung him a hefty look. But Rago grinned like he was enjoying this. "I'll tell you," he said to Gannon. "Hallet an' Burac used to be some pumpkins in this neighborhood till King Jordan began gettin' notions. He wanted to build this place into one of the top-notch outfits of the West. You can see for yourself he got off to a pretty good start. Two-three years ago he bought out Hallet, lock, stock an' barrel. The agreement was that Hallet was to pull his freight—I know for a fact he agreed not to start another spread around here. But he got to thinkin' things over kind of, an' decided with the money King had given him he could get built in better than he was before. He started buyin' up land an' he worked real quiet-like, playin' the same game Jordan was, only playin' it under cover.

"In about a year he'd gotten hold of a pretty good string of outfits—some of them ones King Jordan had set his heart on gettin'. When it got to the place where Shorty owned land from the bend in Turkey Creek clear down to Copper Mountain, an' back clean to the Pleasant Valley road, Jordan learned what he was up to.

"There was a hell of a big wrangle. Jordan reminded him of his agreement; but he hadn't got it down in writin' an' Shorty laughed in his face. He come out open then an' told King Jordan he could go to hell if he didn't like it—that the X Y Z was a comin' ranch an' could hold its own with the best of 'em.

"Jordan gave him three months to settle his business and hit the trail. Hallet just hired himself some leather-slappers an' set back, figuring he was pretty. But Jordan was a stubborn coot an' had a temper like hell's pitchfork. His outfit struck the X Y Z one night an' burned more'n half of Shorty's buildin's. A bunch of guys got killed an' most of Shorty's tough bunch quit an' headed for the tulles.

"Since then, Jordan's been grazin' the bulk of his cattle on Shorty's range till Shorty's critters ain't nothin' but skin an' bones. Last season when roundup come, King Jordan took half of Shorty's calf crop, claimin' they was borned of Box O D bulls an' that he'd been doing Shorty

a big favor allowin' his she-stuff the use of 'em."

Rago laughed.

A LOOK at Hallet's face was enough to show Gannon how much truth was in Rago's story.

"What about Burac?"

Rago looked at the rancher. The owner of the Jug was a pugnacious red-faced specimen whose left cheek seemed cast in the bulge made by his cud of strong tobacco. He didn't look the type to take any slush off Rago. But he didn't open his mouth, so the Flying M owner sneered and said, "Of late King Jordan's been doin' considerable talkin' about rustlers, an' lookin' towards Dutch-woman Butte every time he does it. Of course, he might be prejudiced. Likely I would be in his boots.

"It all got started last summer when the Box O D's south boundary got clean down to Greenback Creek. Jordan figured Panther Spring out to be included in his territory, but Burac, who'd been usin' the spring, couldn't see it that way at all. Jordan offered to settle the business with good hard silver dollars. But Burac looked him straight in the eye an' called him a 'goddamned range hog!' It made ol' King pretty hot, but he kept a checkrein on his temper an' told Burac to name his price. Burac said he wouldn't part with that spring if King owned the las' damn' dollar on earth.

"King never said a thing, just turned his bronc round and went back to his line-riders' shack at Yellow Jacket. That ain't far off, and there's those that say Kelstane Burac watched him through a glass. I can't tell you the straight of that part. But in a coupla weeks some of the Jug cattle begun layin' down an' stickin' their feet up. He musta lost more'n forty head before he found there was arsenic in Panther Spring.

"News of that didn't take a whale of a while to get around. Burac swore Jordan had had his line riders pull that stunt to get even with Burac for refusin' to give up the spring. Jordan swore Burac had done it himself to start something and get a lot of sympathy on his side. I don't know who done it; but it sure did start aplenty. The country between Yellow Jacket an' Panther Spring has got to be a regular no-man's land, an' any jasper is sure takin' his life in his hands if he tries t' go across it. Three fellas have been shot there since last August. None of 'em died, but I can tell you they was plenty sick."

"Whose men were they?" Gannon asked reflectively.

"One of 'em was a Box O D puncher. The other two were Burac boys. It kinda looked like Jordan was one up on him...."

There was a little bit of silence. Then Burac drawled, "I've often wondered what a polecat looked like...."

But Rago only laughed.

"I suggest," said Autwine, coolly fingering the string tie at his throat, "we ask the Sheriff to search one of us before we leave. It's in his mind that one of us has lifted that knife from Jordan's back—"

That jarred Hallet loose of his trance. He popped to his feet like a thing of Indian rubber. His E-string voice squealed loud, indignant protest. "I won't submit to it! I know my rights," he piped, "an' I ain't a-goin' to stand for any fool plays like that! It ain't that I got somethin' to conceal—"

"Of course not," Rago said. "I ain't keen on that idee, either." He ran disapproving eyes across the Box O D's top screw. "You don't think I'm packin' that pig-sticker, do you?"

"Of course not," Autwine murmured. "I don't think that any of you are packing it. Just struck me it might be a good notion to convince the Sheriff, that's all."

"Well, I don't aim to turn my pockets out," grunted Burac heavily.

"I'm not askin' anyone to shell out," Gannon said. "There's something I want to know, though, Autwine. Is that trading post at Red Rock Springs located on Jordan's land?"

THE Jordan range boss nodded thoughtfully. "Uh-huh . . . Yes, it

is. Our boundaries, although rough, are a bit involved. Northeast from Tonto Creek we're bounded by Del Shay Creek, Skunk Tank Canyon and Chalk Mountain. Our northermost point west of Tonto Creek is Brady Canyon. On the east we're bounded by Bear Head Canyon—which is not a part, technically, of our range. We stretch clear south to Greenback Creek, and our western line takes its course from the Mazatzal Mountains."

Gannon was considering this when Tug spoke up to say, "It seems to me that Pronto's right. We ought to let the Sheriff look us over. Suspicion's a damned unpleasant thing. It can color a man's reputation quicker'n a hundred known facts against him. An' once started, a man could easier rid himself of ten soap holes."

He eyed his guests appraisingly. Shrugged. "Well—If you ain't minded to let him search you, I don't guess there's anythin' can be done about it. Not unless he's got a warrant handy. Personally, though, I'm for letting him look right now."

But it was plain as paint the rest weren't. Hallet and Rago and Burac looked definitely set against it. Though Rago managed to make it appear his objection was on the matter of principle.

Gannon looked at Tug. "Wonder if you'd care to tell me what's the cause of the bad feeling that's between yourself and Candalero?"

Tug opened his mouth, hesitated, then closed it with a scowl. He stood that way a moment, studying a section of the floor in morose silence. When he lifted his chin his mouth made a straight, grim line. "Wouldn't you be sore," he asked, "if a man seemed to be trying to make things look like you were a killer?"

Gannon said, "I suppose I would. But—"

"I will tell you about this matter," Jesus Candalero said. "I am have great admiration for this fellow's sister—"

"You shut that goddam mouth," Tug snarled, "or I'll shut it for you permanent!"

CHAPTER IX

"Shake Yore Irons Loose!"

IT WAS long before Gannon got to sleep that night. And it wasn't so much the trapped heat of this Basin country that kept him churning, as it was the problems he was faced with, and the many alternatives presented by those problems.

In the first place, who, he wondered had killed King Jordan? If Tulare had not done so, then who had? Autwine? Possibly; but Gannon did not think so. He could not imagine sufficient motive for the man. And Autwine, in the sheriff's opinion, was a man who would need a good strong motive to allow himself to be tangled in a thing like that. Autwine was a careful hombre; a man who kept himself a jump and a half ahead of any game that might involve him. A cool, deliberate man who looked ahead to find the answers. No; Gannon could not see him in the role of Jordan's killer.

But he might, the sheriff thought, have brought himself to the point of selling Jordan out. He could easy see the enigmatic Autwine in a role of that raw kidney. The Box O D range boss might well have considered Jordan's death a foregone conclusion in any event, and in such case have cast about to find what situation he'd be up against once King Jordan were just so much dank clay—and having found, have seen his profit in selling Jordan out.

But if he had done so—if he had so arranged things as to have necessitated Jordan's fatal return to the ranch—then it seemed almighty likely either Pritchett or Tulare had snuffed out Jordan's light.

But there it was. Had one of these been the killer, how was it that Tennessee's kerchief had come to be found alongside Tulare's body?

The inference to be drawn from that was something Gannon was doing his best to get shut of. Too often had he considered that possibility since this morning when, with Cherokee Pritchett, he had looked on Tulare's body. So many things would

dovetail nicely to that theory; so many little cogs drop easily into place. If Tennessee had killed Tulare she had yanked that knife from Jordan's back. And she'd had the chance.

It all tied in so well.

Gannon scowled, thrust hands deep down in his pockets and took a turn or two about the room. It tied in well, but he had no stomach for that conclusion. What about this Jordan-Hallet feud, and the enmity known to have existed between King Jordan and Burac? What of these if the girl were Tulare's nemesis? She would not have killed Tulare unless she knew he had killed her father; of that much Gannon felt certain.

He rammed impatient hands through the curls of his yellow hair. Had Hallet been content to watch Jordan pasture his herds on Hallet land—to see King Jordan driving off half his calf crop? Had Burac crouched back idle after the poisoning of his spring, apathetically waiting for Jordan to force him off his range?

Gannon snorted. It didn't seem a whole heap likely.

AND yet— Well, take it from another angle. Suppose Tulare to have been the first man killed. Under such a hypothesis, could King Jordan have been the sheepman's killer?

Irritably Gannon shook his head. He didn't know, but he wouldn't have put any money on the notion.

He wondered, under such a circumstance, if Burac, Tug, or Hallet could have snuffed the sheepman's light.

Where was Rago's place in this picture? Had the boss of Flying M ever had any trouble with Jordan? If he had, would he have chanced so blithely that ribbing of Hallet and Burac?

Another thing; had Rago, as he claimed, stayed home because of expected company? And had that company actually arrived? There was a point to be taken into consideration. If the company had not come, who could swear that Rago had stayed home?

Too, Gannon wanted to know the identity of Rago's expected company. Why hadn't the man, if the person had actually arrived, cared to reveal the visitor's identity?

There was much about Vic Rago that Gannon wished to know.

But most of his conjectures boiled down to one plain fact. Before things could be lined up straightly a man would have to know which had met death first—Tulare or King Jordan. And this was knowledge that would take a deal of getting!

There was another possibility, however, that could more easily be explored. Might there not, he wondered, be another faction in this business—one connected with neither the sheep nor cattle crowd—yet having its eye on this Basin country? Some faction working secretly against them both? A faction sufficiently interested in the inauguration of a range war as to resort to downright murder?

Obviously it was possible. He had heard of such things happening in other sections. It was a ruse frequently favored by slick rustlers; a stunt by which they gained ample time and a modicum of safety with which to strip a range. It was a dodge sometimes employed as well by land companies, irrigation projects, and out-of-state-owned syndicates. Could not one of these be working here? This Basin country might be well worth grabbing. King Jordan had plainly thought it so.

Gannon nodded to the possibility, determined to keep his eyes skinned.

Then he stopped his pacing suddenly, brought up by a startling thought. Was it possible King Jordan and Tulare could have shared some grisly secret—something necessitating the swift removal of them both?

He puzzled it a while, revolving its various factors, but stumped before the problem of a thing which could have brought a sheepman of Tulare's sort into rubbing elbows with a cowman like King Jordan. Nowhere in the notion could he find a place for Tennessee, for Rago, or for those other cowmen. No combination of

circumstances he could imagine could have paired in anything approximating double harness two men of the caliber of Tulare and the cow king.

So that was definitely out.

But removing it from consideration did not rub from the Sheriff's thoughts the chance that both men's lights had been snuffed by the selfsame hand. He let it go like that for the time, and presently fell asleep.

The trading post at Red Rock Spring, as Gannon found when he got there early next morning, was hardly more than a combination general store and barroom. The trail had swung from the low hills through a flat dry wash, suddenly to disclose these three old buildings grouped about the shallow pool. One shack housed Ed Shoemaker's latest squaw, to judge by the dirty, squalling brats that were wrangling around it. Another held a one-time blacksmith shop, the ashes of its forge long dead, its anvil battered, rusty. The third, and by far the largest, was the trading post itself; shaped like an old tobacco shed and tricked out with a sagging veranda beneath whose warped and twisted roof lounged three stiffly silent hombres—Rago, Burac, and Calhoun.

"The three graces," murmured Gannon, eyeing them; "Peace, Charity, an' Mercy Mild." Ignoring their frowns, he got down and climbed the two steps to the veranda, faintly smiling. Burac's red cheeks were sullen; his glance followed Gannon warily. Calhoun kept a strictly neutral face. But Rago's hard lips cracked a grin.

He said, "Hello, Gannon."

"Where's Ed Shoemaker?"

RAGO jerked his head toward the place's interior. "You'll find him in there someplace, putterin' around. C'mon in an' I'll treat you to a drink—"

"From what you told me yesterday, Calhoun, I'd hardly expected to find you hanging 'round here."

Calhoun said carefully. "A man has to trade where he can get supplies." He gave Gannon a long look then and closed his mouth.

A breed kid, rawboned and gangling, came around a corner and stood staring. Rago said, "Take the Sheriff's horse an' put it in the shed."

Gannon watched a moment while he built a cigarette left-handed. Then, scratching a match against the railing, he lit his smoke and strode inside the store.

The place was dim and filled with shadows and stacked with dusty, cobwebbed goods. Rago came in after him and sent a loud yell sailing down its musty length. "Ed—come out here! You got a customer; a sheriff wantin' to buy some cartridges!"

Gannon turned his head, raked Rago with a narrow glance. "Very clever," he told him softly, and put his back against the bar. "You get paid anything for advertisin' customers that way?"

"Shucks," Rago grinned, "I thought you was wantin' waitin' on."

Gannon did some thinking while he looked around the place. Calhoun and Burac came in and stood there watching him, and a lank string-bean of a man came trotting forward from the back. He went behind the bar and poked a look at Gannon. "What you want?"

"A snort of rotgut," Rago told him. "Set out a bottle an' four clean glasses."

The animated skeleton behind the bar spun a bottle and four tumblers into play. Rago poured the drinks and when he had finished chucked down a silver dollar.

Gannon said, "I'm still able to pay for mine," and put a quarter by the side of Rago's money. "Your name Shoemaker?"

The man behind the bottle said "Yeah," and looked a little restless.

"Leave your bung-starter where it is. I just wanted to be sure who was at the listening end when I started my palaver. This your place?"

"Lock, stock an' bar'l," Shoemaker grunted.

"Did Tug Jordan and some other hombre drop in here together the other night?"

Shoemaker shot a slanchwise look at Rago. "Rago," Gannon said, "you

better keep out of this." And to the squaw-loving proprietor, "Did he?"

"Did who?"

"Did they—Tug Jordan an' this other bird?"

"Wal, yes; now you ask me, I reckon they did."

"How long'd they stay?"

"Wal, so-so. Be kinder hard t' say."

Gannon stared at him. Shoemaker fidgeted. Gannon said, "What time'd they get here?"

Shoemaker's pallid tongue swashed around his lips.

"Quick!" Gannon snapped. "I want an answer."

That glint of animal cunning that lurked in the trader's little eyes grew suddenly more pronounced. "Why, lemme see," he reflected. "'F I remember right, it musta been somewheres 'long about ten-fifteen. Seems like I was windin' the clock—I usually do that most nights 'round ten, or mebbe ten-twelve. I was—"

"You're doin' pretty well," Gannon remarked, "at providin' loopholes for yourself to wriggle out of. Let's have the straight of it."

The bony structure of Shoemaker's face became suddenly plainer. He said flatly, sullenly, "If you don't cotton to the way I tell things—"

"Where were you on the night of Candalero's party?"

"Right here!"

"Yeah? What were you doin'?"

"Wringin' a tune from my wife's melodeon—"

Gannon flashed a look at Rago. "Is there a melodeon in this hole?"

Rago nodded. "An' Ed does play it occasional-like. When the spirit's in him he ain't half bad."

Gannon's head swung back to the trader, boring the man with its narrowed eyes. "What were you playin'?"

A flush ran up the sullen lines of Shoemaker's scowling face. "I don't remember."

"What time did Jordan get here?"

"Told you once. What you tryin' t' do? You tryin' t' catch me up?"

Gannon looked at him. "I'm trying to get at the truth—"

"You'll get no truth out of this place," Calhoun grunted morosely. "God Himself couldn't find the track of it here."

"Listen—" Rago gruffed, lifting a hand for silence. "Someone comin'."

The leisured clop of a horse's hoofs came plainly through the thin board walls.

Burac wheeled to the window—stiffened.

"Shake yore irons loose! It's one of them goddam sheepmen!"

CHAPTER X

Unwelcome News

IT WAS Pritchett. He dropped his reins across the snorting post and came tramping in with all the cool assurance of a brush peddler. No concern was revealed on that high flat copper face as his glance took in those present. He said, "Mornin', gents," and stood his rifle against the wall.

Gannon saw the dark rebellious flush that swept across Vic Rago's cheeks. He said to Rago: "Take it easy."

Rago wheeled with a smothered oath. "You backin' these goddam underwears?" His gray eyes shone like bits of metal, and there was a patent danger in the droop of his lips.

Gannon said, "I'm not backin' anyone. I'm reppin' for the Law, case you've forgot. This ain't the time for gun-play, Rago, an' I'll thank you to remember it."

Rago stood there in a sullen silence, his upper body bent a little forward, his left hand paused not far from the pistol's butt protruding from the open top of the southpaw holster at his groin.

Rago's pose was reflected in the stiffened attitude of Burac. Only Calhoun's face showed strictly neutral. Shoemaker looked ready to duck behind his bar.

Gannon said, "What do you want here, Pritchett?"

"You might say I was prospectin' 'round. Free country, ain't it?"

"Not to you, it ain't," growled Burac thickly.

"I guess my money's as spendable as the next. I come down to get supplies, since you're all in a sweat to

know. I guess you don't mind my eatin', do you?"

"You better keep to hell out of this country, Pritchett," Rago warned, "less'n you're huntin' a damn' quick grave. Hackberry Basin ain't needin' any underwear."

Pritchett's heavy lips curved faintly. "Seems kind of proddy, Sheriff. Guess you must have told him about that handkerchief we found—"

"What handkerchief?" Rago wheeled a suspicious look from Gannon to Pritchett and back again. "What handkerchief's he talkin' about?"

"Why," said Pritchett smiling, "the blood-stained one Gannon an' me found lyin' by Brother Ed's body. Didn't the Sheriff tell you? I bet you'd recognize them initials 'broidered on it—T. J. wasn't they, Gannon?"

Rago paled. The silence held a pulse of thunder. Change lashed its way across Rago's features, leaving them bloated, ugly with the bite of his emotions.

There was a flash of gleaming metal.

But fast as Rago was, Cash Gannon proved the faster. Smoothly, swiftly, accurately he leaped to bring a crashing fist against the cowman's jaw. Gun spilling from his loosened fist, Rago dropped like a pole-axed steer.

Gannon raked a glance across those wooden, watchful faces. The big sheepman seemed hardly to have hoved a fraction yet a gun hung ready in his hand. Looking approvingly at Gannon, he slid the weapon back in its scabbard. "Quick work, Sheriff. I expect you saved a life."

But Gannon did not return that grin. Hot blood was pulsing through his arteries darkening up his cheeks. "That wasn't done for your benefit," he told the sheepman coldly. "It was done because I don't want to see no war get started in this Basin."

"A little late for stoppin' that, don't you reckon?" Pritchett drawled.

GANNON'S glance bit into him. "If you think so, go ahead an' try starting somethin'."

"I won't be startin' anything. All I'm interested in is gettin' my sheep across this country—"

"To where?"

"To the other side of Bear Head Mountain—"

"By Gawd, you'll never cut it!" Burac rasped. "Not while this country's got a gun to stop you!"

"What about that handkerchief?" asked Calhoun in an obvious effort to change the subject. "Dod you really find a handkerchief at all?"

Grimly silent, Gannon pulled the crumpled square of linen from his pocket; tossed it over. Calhoun caught it and his eyes went wide. Shoemaker craned his head from behind the bar. But Burac's gaze stayed its hostile stare on the sheepman's copper face.

Pritchett's smokey eyes stared back unblinking.

"I said," Burac rasped, "You'll never cut it!"

"I think I will," answered Pritchett, equally blunt with his words. "An' neither you nor the rest of these Basin cow-nurses are goin' to stop me. If it's fight you want, I'll give you a bellyful!"

Gannon regarded the sheepman with half-shut eyes. The climbing sun had thrown its smashing heat across the porch. Against this outer brilliance the sheepman's block-shaped figure made a black and heavy shadow. Not a man to bend to the whims of others, Gannon thought; but a man whose stubborn courage would take no cognizance of the odds until the play was finished. A brash, hard man whose stubborn will could drive him to impossible accomplishments.

"What do you want to take your sheep to the other side of Bear Head Mountain for?"

"This pool I told you about—this Alamagordo Pool," said Pritchett, "owns land over there. A raft of it."

Burac stared at the sheepman with unbelieving eyes. Calhoun looked up from the bloodstained handkerchief. "No Basin man would sell—"

"A Basin man did sell it to us. An' we've paid for it, every quarter sec-

tion," Pritchett said. "An' we'll stock it with our sheep."

Gannon broke the ominous silence. "If this pool," he said, "has title to the land, and a public road will get them to it, an' they keep their woollies on that public road, you cowmen better watch your step. The law," he stated plainly, "will be on their side."

Burac swore. Then he and Calhoun exchanged a thoughtful glance. Shoemaker said, "What you fellas goin' to do about Vic Rago?"

Gannon murmured, "The man is out of mischief. Leave him where he lays till he comes to." He bent over, picked up Rago's pistol and thrust it in his pocket.

Pritchett walked over to the bar, paid for a drink and ordered his supplies.

Burac started toward the door, appeared to remember something and turned around. He said to Calhoun, "Who the hell's rag is that?"

Pritchett grinned at him over a shoulder. "The initials spell Tennessee Jordan."

Burac stared. "Gawdlemighty! Rago'll go hawg wild—"

"Gone once a'ready, ain't he? It didn't take him very far."

"You don't get the point," said Burac. "Vic's engaged to marry that girl!"

CHAPTER XI

A Bitter Cup

GANNON saw now what he had to do. Some inner voice insisted he had known damned well what he had to do ever since he'd stood by Cherokee Pritchett looking down on Tulare's body; but he swore this was not true—that this unwelcome knowledge of Tennessee's being engaged to marry the boss of Flying M had nothing to do with the sudden clarity with which he saw his duty.

Anyway, the path of duty now was plain. He had to question young Tug Jordan's sister concerning her movements on that fateful night Candalero had picked to throw his party. He must learn as well the reason for those angry words that had been exchanged between her and King Jordan on the afternoon preceding that party. It might also be wise to learn if she had any knowledge of the bad blood existing between young Tug and Candalero.

But looking at her as she stood facing him by the sunlit stable wall almost turned him from his purpose. She had a gingham dress on now and the change in her appearance was startling. It had made him catch his breath when he'd first looked at her; it was pulling at his emotions now, prodding up that gnawing hunger, turning him impatient, restless, pouring an unaccustomed turbulence into him that could not be thrown off.

He said: "I have to ask you a few things, Tennessee. Some of them won't be pleasant. But they're things that must be asked. . .and answered. Things I've been putting off too long, hoping—striving to find some way around them. There isn't any way."

Her eyes came up to him, worried but bravely; questioningly. "It's—it's about these killings, Cash?"

"Yes."

She nodded, almost imperceptibly. She said with a far-off look in the brownness of her gaze, "I'm ready, Cash," and waited.

"Do you know who killed your father?"

"No."

"On the night of Candalero's jamboree, what were you doing coming off the Del Shay trail when Hallet saw you at about eight-thirty?"

"Must—must I answer that?"

"Did you kill Ed Tulare?" he asked bluntly.

Very slowly she shook her head. But he saw something in her eyes that made him say: "Tennessee, don't lie to me. If you killed him say so!"

"I didn't kill him, Cash. . ."

"Do you know who did?"

He saw the tremor that went over her. She said, "I—I can't answer that. . ."

"Can't or won't?" he demanded harshly.

Tennessee's eyes met Gannon's straightly. "Won't."

Gannon's eyes went narrow, bitter. "When was it you saw Rago last—alone?"

Tennessee's slim form went straight against the stable wall. Her chin came up. She said: "I have never been alone with Victor Rago," and did not quite succeed in hiding the shudder that passed over her.

Gannon saw it. His first emotion was a swift and upward surge of joy. Women did not shudder when they spoke of men they loved! Nor did their eyes hold such remote yet scornful glinting. Then he remembered Burac's words. Their poison tingled through his veins like fire.

"Who was the company Rago had the night of Candalero's party?"

Surprise pulled up her brows. "Company?" She stared at him. "Was that why Vic Rago didn't come?"

"That's why he said he didn't come."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know—"

"You're engaged to him, aren't you?"

Her head came up and the glance she put across his face was searching; wondering. She nodded faintly, as thought to some conclusion that had come to her. She did a strange thing then; she smiled. A wistful, fearful, yet altogether pleased kind of smile. "Yes," she said very softly.

His shoulders stirred impatiently. There was a ruffled look about him. He said bluntly: "If you're engaged to him, it means you intend to marry him. If you're going to marry a man, you ought to know something about him. You ought to know the kind of company he entertains—"

"No," she said, "that doesn't necessarily follow, Cash. I know nothing of Mr. Rago's friends."

"He's friendly with your brother, ain't he?"

She hesitated. Then: "They're acquainted," she said quickly.

His face showed a clear expression of his feelings. A quicker breathing got into her as he placed both hands upon her shoulders. It was not like last night beneath the pepper trees. There were deep lines in Gannon's face now; he looked older. He said, "I can't seem to make you out, Tennessee."

SHE smiled lazily. "Is it worth the bother?"

He said gustily: "I think it is," and the grip of his fingers became a painful thing. The slant of the afternoon sun threw the tousled shape of his yellow curls across his forehead in cool blue shadows. He looked very masculine.

She said quickly, low and breathless: "I—I'd better go now."

He looked at her another moment, then took his hands away. "You were in that room alone with your dad the other night when Calhoun came. Sure you can't say whether that knife was in his back or not?"

"I answered that question yesterday; I didn't notice."

"What caused the bad feeling that's between Candalero and your brother?"

A trace of color got into her cheeks. "Candalero," she said distastefully, "imagines he's in love me. Tug doesn't like it. He wants—"

She pulled up suddenly, laughed and explained humorously: "Tug thinks I'm too good for a Spaniard." She sobered. "It would be amusing if Don Jesus weren't so serious about it. He can't understand Tug's attitude. He comes from one of the oldest Spanish families in America."

Gannon threw his cigarette away. His lips made a wry grimace. "One more question. On the afternoon before Candalero's party you had angry words with King Jordan—"

He broke off, seeing the expression in her eyes. "Who told you that?"

"It doesn't matter," he said impatiently. "You did, or you didn't. Which?"

"I guess we did raise our voices a little. We had no idea we were entertaining eavesdroppers."

"What was the fuss about?"

"I'd rather not tell you that. Unless you insist—"

"I do."

Her eyes searched him with a strange impersonal quality, as though she were wondering, perhaps, wheth-

er to revise an estimate she might have made of him; as though she were wondering what manner of man he was.

She said, "You ought to drop this business—"

"I'm the sheriff of this county, Tennessee," he reminded her grimly.

She looked at him a long while. Then a baffled, weary breath escaped her and she settled back against the stable wall. "We were arguing about my engagment to Vic Rago. My father didn't like it. He was furious. He said that Rago was a 'lazy, shiftless, improvident troublemaker.' He said he wouldn't have the man around the place and that if I married him he would wash his hands of me—that he wanted nothing more to do with me as long as I was 'that man's' wife."

Gannon gave her a long and reticent regard. "What did you tell him?" he asked finally.

"I said that I intended to marry Vic Rago anyway."

CHAPTER XII

"Where the Hell's My Gun?"

GANNON was in a wicked mood for the rest of that day. He ate his supper in a grim, locked silence, never speaking unless spoken to, and several times not even then. When Autwine asked conversationally, "How you comin' on this thing, Gannon?" his only answer was a grunt.

When he was finished he pushed back his chair; built and lit a cigarette. He puffed in morose silence. His look, as the cook said afterwards, "plumb curdled all the cawffee."

Tug was fishing out his pipe when Gannon said: "What time did you leave the rest of this bunch on the way to the fandango?"

For a moment Tug sat very still, even his eyes remaining motionless. Then he brought his pipe out and started packing its bowl with tobacco taken from another pocket. "I didn't know it then," he answered thoughtfully, "but it must have been about ten minutes before my father started back to the ranch. Why?"

"Just wonderin'."

"You gettin' any place on these murders?"

"Not yet."

Presently the three punchers who were still at table got up and sauntered outside, their spurs dragging broken melodies from the rough plank floor. Gannon, Tug and Autwine now had the place to themselves. Tennessee had not come over to supper.

An evident weariness lay heavily on Gannon's shoulders; all the man's enormous vitality seemed drained out of him. He made a sullen lump, hunched there over his plate. His elbows rested on the table edge. Smoke from his burning cigarette rolled upward striking his frowning forehead, splaying out about his squinted eyes.

He spoke abruptly through that smoke. "How long's Autwine been on King Jordan's payroll?"

Autwine said, "I've been roddin' this outfit—"

"I wasn't askin' you!" The blunt savagery of Gannon's tone stopped the frock-coated range boss in mid-sentence.

Autwine put the flats of his hands on the table top, bent his broad chest forward, crooked his elbows and got to his feet. His face was set like wax and his chair made a tiny scraping sound as he shoved it back with a careful foot. His eyes were fixed on Gannon without expression.

The room was very quiet. No one moved so much as a finger.

"Wait!" Gannon said as the range boss started toward the door. "You wanted to talk— How much did you make by sellin' King Jordan out to the sheepmen?"

Autwine wheeled his head and looked at Gannon across his shoulder. Some unknown thinking seared its bitter mark across his eyes. "I didn' sell King Jordan out."

"No?" Without taking his gaze from the range boss, Gannon said to Jordan: "How long's this fellow been on your payroll?"

Tug's voice was brittle. "About six months."

"What happened to the man before him?"

"Asked for his time an' quit the country."

"An' how long, Autwine," Gannon said, "have you been tryin' to bulldog Tennessee into marryin' you?"

A DULL flush spread across the range boss' cheeks. A strangled snarl tore out of Tug, coming simultaneously with the sound of his kicked-back chair.

Autwine whipped his torso clear around. Danger glinted in his eyes. He breathed, "You cocky pup!" and started forward.

Gannon came out of his seat with a rush.

Autwine swung. Gannon ducked and sent a smashing right to the scowling face. The range boss staggered. But he kept his feet though blood was drooling down his chin. He said thickly: "You got a gun on you—grab it!"

Gannon stayed the way he was; motionless, his upper body stiff.

Autwine cursed. He shoved a shaking hand inside his coat.

Gannon did not wait. He struck again—hard. That lashing fist took Autwine flush upon the jaw, knocking his shoulders after it; sending him reeling through the door to a skinning sprawl on the packed adobe of the yard.

Gannon saw the punchers come crowding up; saw them staring down at the foreman with open mouths. A fellow said: "What hit him?" And another one muttered, "That goddam sheriff's got a wallop like a mule!"

Tug was eying Gannon with a queer excitement. "D'you reckon he had anythin' to do with those killings?"

"I don't know," said Gannon stiffly, "but if he had—"

"By Gawd," cried Tug, "I'll help you nail 'em on him!"

Tennessee Jordan, after leaving Gannon at the stable, went into the house and shut herself up in her room. She felt miserable, restless, rebellious; angry at herself and at a world she could no longer understand. All her life she had wanted to meet a man like Gannon; why had an indifferent Providence picked this time to send him to her, so swiftly after she had burned her bridges by announcing her engagement to Vic Rago? If only, she thought unhappily, she could have met Cash Gannon sooner—before her life had become entangled in this mess that now had hold of it.

She liked the strong, tough cast of his sun-burned features; the long solid lips, the smooth taciturnity of lean and wind-whipped cheeks, the hard, reticent serenity that stared frim his somber eyes. He was slim, with heavy, blunt and work-scarred hands—hands, she had noted, that could be wonderfully steady during important moments; hands that had a grip like steel. Even now she could feel the pressure of his fingers on her shoulders.

Many times when in his presence she had felt the electric impact of his personality. A deeper color got into her cheeks as she thought about it. There was a magnetism about the man that bit deep into her, loosing strange thoughts and stranger emotions. She wanted to know him better. It would be great sport, she thought, riding the range with him—but how could she with this crazy engagement to Vic Rago hanging over her like a sword? Rago was a vain and jealous man; he would resent her even thinking of another.

She'd been mad to embrace such folly! Yet in truth she could not justly blame it all on fate. She was not a capricious girl, either; she'd gone into this thing with her eyes open. But she hadn't known Cash Gannon then.

Through the window she saw Tug Jordan crossing the yard. But her thoughts shied away from him; it was so much pleasanter to think of this stranger, Sheriff Gannon.

There was a recklessness in him; she had sensed it more than once in glinting streaks of humor flashing suddenly from his eyes. A brashness that might carry him far, or as easily prove his undoing. The devil's own temper was in him too; it showed in the erectness of his carriage, in the way he carried his head. It colored

up his words and filled his glance with steel, and was only curbed, she thought, by the drastic will that governed all his actions.

It was past supper time, yet she did not feel the ache of hunger. She got little pleasure from her meals these days—or from anything else, if it came to that. She lived in a world of nightmare; a plight not eased a fraction by the knowledge that if she would she could break that obnoxious engagement now—for she knew she would never break it. She had passed her word.

But it would be nice, she thought, to tell Cash Gannon the straight of this; to explain to him the horrors of that night of Candalero's party.

She got to her feet. Why not? she asked herself. Surely she could make him see her side of it. And it would help him in his work. . .

He'd be over at the cook shack now, probably sitting at the table smoking. Maybe he'd be swapping tales with the boys, or discussing range conditions, horses, saddles, guns—things that interested men and that men talked of when among themselves.

She'd tell him now; make a clean breast of the thing. Perhaps he'd be able to help her . . .

She got her vanity and stood before the cracked mirror over her dresser. She patted powder on her nose and smoothed it carefully; put her hands up to her hair. When she was finished she looked critically at the result—she even frowned a little. She wished she were a little taller. She hardly came to his shoulder. Of course that wasn't anything to get down about. And her skin was nice. But those freckles sprinkled beneath her eyes! She made a face.

After all, she reflected grimly, she was still engaged to Rago. And would very likely have to marry him.

Several of the men were helping Autwine to his feet as she approached. She wondered what had happened. His clothes were mussed and dusty. There was blood on his chin and one side of his face was smeared with grit. It looked, she thought, as though a horse had thrown him. But she didn't see any horse.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

The range boss' look wiped the grins from the punchers' faces. "No," he said distinctly, and tramped off toward his quarters.

She stared after him a moment, wondering. Then she said: "Is Sheriff Gannon around here?"

The men regarded her curiously. "No, he ain't," one of them answered finally. "He rode off up the Chalk Mountain trail about fifteen minutes ago. Would—would you want I should go after him, ma'am?"

The steel went out of her. "No," she said, turning her drooping shoulders toward the house. "No, don't bother. It wasn't very important."

After all, perhaps it was for the best.

LEAVING TUG'S OFFER of help unanswered, Gannon had gone to the corral, roped and saddled his bronc, and ridden off across the Basin in the direction of Candalero's ranch.

But he had not gone very far when, dipping down into a little hollow, he saw a horse standing three-footed directly across the trail, a horse without a saddle but with its rider sitting atop the blanket stiff and motionless as an Indian. He might have been an Indian, to judge by his dark, swart skin and the beaded headband that held his coarse black hair in place. He flung a hand aloft, palm outward; the Indian sign for peace.

But Gannon knew him. It was the halfbreed kid who'd stabled his horse at Shoemaker's.

Gannon said, "Howdy," and stopped his roan a few feet distant.

"How." Shoemaker's kid regarded him stolidly. "You gimme glub."

There was a rusty old Sharps rifle across his knees, and a look in his eye Gannon did not like. But he'd had dealings with uppish breeds before, and felt quite able to keep the game in hand.

"Grub, eh?" he said and raked a knowing glance across the copper countenance. "What the hell d'you take me for—a charity?"

"No charity. You gimme tobacco —dinero!"

"Not so's you could notice it," Gannon snorted. "You better hump it back to your ol' man's reservation before I run you in." He slapped aside his vest to show the star pinned on his shirt. The breed kid's eyes surveyed it scornfully. "This county ain't partial to panhandlers," Gannon hinted.

"Me no panhandle. Maybeso me ketchum savvy. What you pay?"

"Maybeso I ain't interested," Gannon said, and picked up his reins.

"Ugh! Maybeso you like get killed, hah?" The beady eyes blinked craftily. "That Rago man no like you."

Gannon laughed.

"Wait!" cried Shoemaker's kid. "I tell you 'bout that lie!"

"What lie?"

"About that Tug man. How much you give?"

Gannon stopped his horse. He stared at the breed kid carefully. "Tug Jordan?"

"Ugh!"

"What about him? You mean he didn't get to your place at the time your ol' man said?"

Shoemaker's kid bobbed his black head emphatically.

"What time?"

The breed shrugged. "No savvy." He spread out his hands. "Me no see. You gimme tobacco—dinero!"

Gannon handed over his sack of Durham and a silver dollar. It vanished like smoke before a Kansas twister. Gannon said, "How, if you didn't see him, do you know Tug man didn't get to your place at ten o'clock?"

"Tug man no there ten. Me there!" cried Shoemaker's son, as if that settled it. He slapped a fist against his chest. "Me there—me no see!"

Well, it looked like that was all that he could get out of him, so Gannon nodded and turned his horse back toward the ranch. Looked like he ought to talk this over with Tug personally. It might be Tug would change his mind about that statement he had made.

WHEN VIC RAGO came back to consciousness and, with something of a groan, managed to get an elbow under him, Gannon had left the Red Rock post. But Calhoun and Burac were still there. They were lapping up whisky at Shoemaker's bar. They heard him getting up and turned around to stare at him.

"You look like the wrath of God," Burac observed unfeelingly.

"Gawd, what hit me?" Rago groaned.

"Gannon," Calhoun remarked succinctly.

"An' you're lucky he didn't break your jaw," growled Burac. "How're your feelin'?"

The boss of Flying M rubbed his jaw with solicitude. He winced. "Mark my words," he growled. "Next time I see that guy I'm gonna beat his ears in!"

"Somebody ought to do it," Burac said, and winked at Calhoun. "Wait till you hear what's up!"

Rago stopped feeling of his jaw to look up with a scowl. He looked from Burac to Calhoun and back again inquiringly. When no one spoke, he planted both big fists on his hips and glared. "Well—is the thing a secret?"

Burac chuckled. "You tell 'im, Cal. I wanta watch his face."

Calhoun said. "Them sheepmen own land in this country, Vic. A big jag of it east of Bear Head Mountain—"

"Hallet!" Rago snarled, and swore. "The bloody fool! He pulled that trick to even up with Jordan!"

"Sure. But it'll work a mischief on the rest of us, too. They got ninety thousand sheep in that bunch. You know dawn' well they ain't goin' to keep that many penned up east of Bear Head. But that ain't all—the Sheriff says if them sheepmen can find a public road that'll take 'em to their land, an' can keep their damn' sheep on it, us cowmen better leave 'em plumb alone 'Cause the law'll be backin' 'em up."

"Is that so!" Rago smashed an oath among the rafters. "By God, we'll

see about that! Where the hell's my gun?"

"Gannon picked it up," Burac said. "I reckon he rode off with it."

Rago's eyes looked startled.

"What's the matter?" Burac's puffed-out cheek showed a hint of sardonic humor. "That ain't the gun you used on Tulare, is it?"

Rago gave him a hard quick look, then pivoted with a curse and made for the door. "I'm goin' to see young Jordan! We'll get these underwears right!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Cricket Chorus

IT WAS JUST beginning to get dark, with the bugs tuning up their wing-scratchers for the customary all-night chorus, when Gannon got back to the Box O D. Several of the ranch hands were smoking solemnly before the bunkhouse. Autwine wasn't any place in sight, and everything looked smooth and quiet as an old frog's leg. But Gannon was not deceived. It was a deal too much like the calm that preceded storms.

He swung the roan over toward the ranch house and Tug came off the porch to meet him. "Any luck?"

"No," Gannon said, "but there's a couple of things I'd like to ask you. I'd admire to know just why you spread that smoke screen about you an' some other fellow stopping at Red Rock Spring the other night for a couple of drinks. If you went there you went alone, an' there's some doubt in my mind if you ever went there at all. I expect you better elucidate."

"You're right about that other fella," Tug said, grinning. "There's no such egg. But there is a stranger perambulatin' round this country, an' it mightn't be a bad idea if you was to look him up. It's just possible there's somebody out to wreck this place. Calhoun was tellin' me about this hombre the other night. He saw 'im over near Red Rock about eight days ago; thought he was actin' kinda suspicious an' started to ride over. But the minute he seen Cal comin' this bird pull for the tulles. Shoemaker was tellin' me yesterday that one of his kids had seen the fella. An' Autwine claims there's somethin' screwy goin' on around this range. He thinks there's a cattle rustler workin' it."

Gannon considered his saddle horn thoughtfully. "Yeah. I'll take a look for him later on. But right now I'm gunnin' for bigger ducks. So that was a bunch of talk you was handin' me about bein' over to Red Rock the other night, eh?"

"No—not about bein' over to Red Rock," Tug said. "I was there. The only loadin' I was doing was about this other fella an' that horse hunt." He had the grace to blush; then scowled. "It was on account of my sister. I didn't want to go to Candalero's, an' that horse tale was the best thing I could think of at the time for gettin' out of it. Then, when you questioned me here, I had to stick to my story or risk her gettin' wise."

"Why didn't you tell her the truth? Where were you anyway?"

"I was at Shoemaker's all evening, but I couldn't tell her that—she's almost as bad as the ol' man was. He thought a gambler was six shades lower'n a snake's belly. If he'd ever caught me gamblin', he'd of chucked me outa here, bag an' baggage, an' don't you never think different! He was a ring-tailed heller on the subject—somebody musta nicked him pretty bad once."

"You can leave King Jordan out of this," Gannon said pointedly, "The fellow I want to know about's you."

But Tug just grinned. "You want me to stick to the truth, don't you?"

"You better, if you know what's good for you."

"Well, all right then. The truth's what I'm givin' you. To make you see my point I have to tell you about the old man's pet peeve. He'd sooner see a gila monster on this spread any day than a dog-eared deck of cards. He couldn't abide 'em! Gave me a helluva lecture on the subject a couple years ago—it was on account of the church sociable over to Rye.

They'd been playin' some kind of sissy game; bridge, I believe they called it. Anyhow, the ol' man said if he ever caught me with a spread of pasteboards in my hands—or heard through someone else that I'd been handlin' 'em—I needn't even come back to pack my things."

He looked at Gannon levelly. "So you see how it was. I couldn't tell Tennessee I'd spent the evenin' over at Red Rock playin' cards."

Gannon studied him thoughtfully. "You were there all evening, eh?"

Tug hesitated. "Well—practically," he admitted.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I might have gone out to see about my horse a couple times. I'd left it out in the brush a piece, case anyone dropped in."

"You go to a lot of trouble to get in a few hands of stud."

"Ain't it the truth? Hell, if you doubt me, go down an' talk to Shoemaker. He'll tell you I was there. So'll his kids. There was three-four of 'em hangin' round the post all evenin' helpin' diminish the stock."

"I've talked with Shoemaker—'

"Then I guess you know I'm givin' it to you straight from the shoulder."

"One of the things I'm curious about is the time you got there."

Tug scratched his head. "You got me there," he admitted. "I never thought to look."

"Shoemaker said you came in round ten."

"I must have been there before that. I went straight down there, soon as the other cleared out of sight."

"Well, Shoemaker claimed it was about ten; said he'd just got through windin' his clock."

Tug chuckled. "Tryin' to alibi me, I guess."

"It's beginning to look that way," said Gannon softly. "One of Shoemaker's kids told me later that you hadn't been round there at ten."

Young Jordan frowned; seemed to be thinking things over. "That's funny. Was he after anything?"

"He wanted some tobacco and money—"

"Ah! There you are," Tug said brightly. "Those breeds would cut your throat for less."

Gannon rasped his jaw reflectively. "Yeah, I expect they would, at that."

"Just a minute," said Tug as he was starting to turn his horse. "If you ain't too busy this evenin', I've got a hunch it might be a good plan if we drop in on that nester."

"Bristol?"

"Yeah." Tug scowled. "Sis thinks he's just a poor misguided pilgrim, an' never would let the ol' man haze him off the range. I reckon she feels a heap sorry for that T. B. daughter of his. 'F it comes to that, I feel kinda sorry for her myself. But Bristol's a bronc of a different temper. Might be a good idea to question him about where he was the other night."

"You got reason to think he wasn't home?" asked Ganon quickly.

"Nothing special. Sis spent a good part of the evenin' over there. But if it was her that Hallet really saw coming off the Del Shay trail that night, then I'd say it was entirely possible he wasn't home at the time that sheepman was bumped."

"I don't suppose your sister's told you where she was?"

"No," said Tug, "she ain't. Damned close-mouthed about the business. But she never was one for spillin' her guts around." He looked at the sheriff slanchwise. "I don't want you to go worryin' her. 'F there's anything you're wantin' to know, you come to me."

There were a number of things Gannon wanted to know, but he didn't see much sense in asking Tug about them. He said: "Better get your horse if you're going with me to Bristol's."

THERE WERE NO lights showing when they dropped from their broncs in Bristol's yard. Tug wasted little time in ceremony. "Open up there, Bristol!" he shouted. "You got company waitin' on your doorstep."

After a moment or two they heard the tramp of hobnailed boots and the scrape of a sliding bar. The door opened three-four cautious inches

and a man's voice said: "What do you want?"

"Wanta talk—it's me, Tug Jordan, an' the Sheriff."

They could hear the nester retreating from the door. Then a light flashed up and he invited them to enter. It was a one-room shack with a faded blanket partitioning off a tiny portion of the rear. "How's your daughter?" Jordan asked.

Bristol shrugged. He was gaunt and wrinkled and had the hungry look that seemed to characterize all the weed-benders in this country. Toil had rounded his shoulders and given his back a hunchy look; the hands that hung at his sides were big and work-scarred, shaped to the grip of a plow. He was fully dressed and Gannon did not miss the big Navy revolver thrust in the waistband of his baggy, earth-stained trousers.

"She's been lookin' kind of poorly here of late," he told them. "I took her over to Rye in the wagon this mornin' an' put her on the stage for Hot Springs—"

"Hot Springs, eh?" said Jordan, frowning. He was eying the nester oddly. "Didn't know you had the money for a trip like that."

Bristol rasped a hand across his jowls. "Wal, I knowned I'd be havin' to do it. She's been lookin' poorer an' poorer— Puts me in mind of the way her maw was took. I knowed she'd never pull through another winter her."

He leaned a hand upon the checkered cloth that covered the homemade table. "I been scrimpin' along the best I could— God knows what we'd 'a' done if it wasn't fer the kindness of you Jordans. Your sister was bound I'd take some of her money—wouldn't hear of 'no' fer a answer. Don't seem hardly right, us borryin' money from a—"

"How much did my sister give you?"

"Wal," said Bristol reflectively, "I done promised not to tell. 'Twas a tidy bit, though. You needn't to worry, Mister Jordan," he added quickly. "I'll see she gets it back if it takes the rest of my life! Us Bristols never forget a favor."

He looked at Tug a bit doubtfully. "Uh—I was right sorry to hear about your father. . . . I reckon we don't know our blessin's. The Lord gives an' He—"

"Was Miss Tennessee over her the other evening?" Gannon asked.

"Yes, sir. She was," said Bristol, looking him straight in the eye. "She was here all evenin'."

"What time'd she get here — or didn't you notice?"

"Just about nigh onto eight o'clock."

Gannon looked at him.

Bristol's gaze stared back unflinching. "Jest about nigh onto eight o'clock," he repeated steadily.

Gannon nodded, strict gravity blanketing all expression from his face. "Don't suppose you heard anything unusual that night, did you?" It was the night that sheepman, Tulare, was killed on the Del Shay Basin trail."

"Is that so?" Bristol nodded thoughtfully. "No, I didn't hear a thing."

They all heard something now, though. Hoof sound, spilling across the yard outside; a man's heavy boots crunching yellow dirt; the rap of a knock on the shack's thin door.

Gannon and Tug exchanged quick glances. Bristol said, "Come in."

It was Pritchett; big and bluff and poker-faced as usual. "Howdy," he greeted coolly. "Saw yore lights an' —Oh, hello there, Mister Jordan. Sorry to hear about your father—"

"Yeah; you're sorry as hell!" Tug growled. His right hand made a restless motion, pausing near his hip. "What you snoopin' round here for?"

"Not for love of yore company," Pritchett came back with a cold, hard look. His inscrutable glance moved across to Gannon. "A little proddy, ain't he? You been tellin' him 'bout that handkerchief?"

Gannon could have throttled the man with pleasure. Far from steering clear of trouble, the big sheepman seemed to go out of his way deliberately to invite it.

Nor was Tug slow to catch some hidden meaning. "What handkerchief?"

"Well, if the Sheriff hasn't told you—"

Tug snarled: "What the hell handkerchief are you talkin' about?" and put his eyes on Pritchett fiercely. He seemed to have inherited some of King Jordan's broad hate of anything connected with mutton. "If you're makin' some crack at me, you better put it in the English language."

"I was referrin'," Pritchett said, "to the handkerchief Gannon an' me found beside Tulare's body."

"What about it? If it's somethin' you're wantin' me to know, quit beatin' about the bush an' spill it—or maybe your guts ain't up to that," Tug drawled in an attempt at insult.

"You may be surprised what my guts are up to," Pritchett said. "This handkerchief I'm mentioning had blood on it. There was initials 'broidered in one corner."

Very thinly Tug said: "What initials?" and his cheeks showed a film of sweat.

"T. J."

Tug's lips framed "Tennessee.' He crouched, and a heavy pistol jumped to his hand. "That's a lie!"

Pritchett stood there stiffly; both hands hung at his sides. His regard of Tug was glassy. "Them's fightin' words, button," he said slowly. "You better wait a minute. The Sheriff's got that snot-rag in his pocket."

Without taking his glance from Pritchett, Tug rasped: "Any truth in that stuff, Gannon?"

Gannon said, "I'm afraid there is," and sighed. "Put up your gun and take a look at this."

Young Jordan stuck his gun in leather, but half his glance stayed on the sheepman's face. He put a groping left hand out and took the kerchief; held it before him on a level with Pritchett's shoulders.

A smoking curse came from him then. He dropped the discolored square of linen as though it burnt his fingers; wheeled, and fixed a bitter glance on Gannon.

For six ticked seconds by the clock on Bristol's table no one moved. With a sulky brilliance in his eyes, Tug said, "By Gawd, you'll do the rest of your snoopin' by yourself!" and slammed his tall, lean-muscled body from the place.

Not until the hoof-sound of Jordan's horse had left all hearing did anyone speak. Then Pritchett drawled: "What you doin' with Tulare's boots on, Bristol?"

The cricket chorus became suddenly very loud.

CHAPTER XIV

"Him an' That Tow-Headed Woman"

GANNON whipped a glance at Bristol.

The nester's face was gray. He scrubbed a hand across his eyes and the stare he flung at Pritchett showed a startled consternation.

"You sure of that?" Gannon questioned.

The sheepman's heavy mouth showed scorn. "Look at the boots. You see that brand on each of them calves?" He pointed with his pipestem. "I was with Tulare the afternoon he burned those on. It was down on the Brazos, in Texas. Ed took the iron from a cowman he'd just shot."

Gannon's gaze swung to the nester. He said, voice riding even: "I expect you better talk."

The implication stirred the old man's moody temper. He said, reckless, angry: "Talk! God above, what can I say? There ain't one man in this damn' Basin would believe me!"

Gannon said, "I'll listen."

"Well, you won't believe it," Bristol declared, "but it's the truth! I ain't had no boots—been goin' round here barefoot! Mornin' after that blow-out at the hoss ranch, I gits up an' finds these boots a-settin' at my door. Hell's fire! 'Course I put 'em on!"

Gannon eyed him doubtfully. "Didn't you find it odd?"

"Odd!" Bristol snorted. "If your feet had been on the ground long as mine hev, you wouldn't find nothin' odd!"

Pritchett said: "Didn't you wonder whose they were?"

"Hell's fire, yes—I wondered! But

it didn't stop me from wearin' 'em, did it?"

A faint grin tugged Gannon's lips. "Don't seem to be much doubt on that score." He looked at Pritchett. "You wantin' to accuse this fellow of Tulare's murder?"

The sheepman carefully tapped the dottle from his pipe. "No. I want," he said, pushing the words out thoughtfully, "to find out first whose boots were put on Tulare."

For a moment Cash Gannon stood absolutely still; stiff, breathless, his mind refusing to function. Then he slammed a glance at the nester's feet. "By God—" he said, and stopped. Pritchett was right; these plain black boots were not the ones he had found on the murdered sheep king. The boots with the telltale heel had been white elkskin, tricked out with big red stars!

His eyes met Pritchett's hotly. The sheepman's smoky orbs stared back unblinking.

"You mean," said Bristol, gaping, "these boots ain't the ones that feller died in?"

Pritchett's voice made a displeased rumble. "Tulare died in fancy, high-cost boots. There was a chunk hacked out of the left one's heel. It was a giveaway, so the guy got rid of 'em. He put 'em on Tulare an' left Tulare's here."

Gannon nodded. "How long you known this, Pritchett?"

The sheepman put away his pipe with a savage gesture. "I spotted those elkskin boots first shake. But I'd no notion where Tulare's had gone till now. I—"

Gannon said suspiciously: "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

The sheepman gave him a look. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"There's a lot of things I'll ask you—when we get to the county seat!"

"We ain't goin'," Pritchett's smile was tight.

SO WAS Gannon's: He was looking down the mouth of the sheepman's leveled gun. "No," he said; "I guess we ain't."

"I've too much to do here first. I've got to get these sheep beyond Bear Head Mountain, an' I've got to do it quick, before these damn cowprods start a blood stampede or something. Why don't you throw in with me, Gannon? By God, we could go places, you an' me!'

"I got a job." Gannon said.

"Yeah—you got a job, all right!" the sheepman snorted. "A job that's goin' to take you with it to hell!"

"Mebbe."

"Well play ball with me, anyway—"

"Think I want the Governor on my neck?"

"Yeah; I heard about that," said Pritchett thoughtfully. "What's Blanford got on you, anyhow?"

"You hear a sight too much!"

"What's he got on you?" Pritchett grinned.

Gannon measured the distance coldly. "No," he thought to himself, "not now." That gun in the sheepman's hand was too damned easily lifted. One blast from its black snout and Gannon would be doing his arguing with angels—a celestial pastime he felt no tearing rush to engage in. He said smokily, "What Blanford's got on me is somethin' we're doin' no talkin' about—now or later. If it's all the same to you, we'll get back to those boots."

Pritchett sighed. But he did not put his gun away. "Which ones?"

"Those fancy elkhides with the pretty red stars. You got any notion whose feet they belong on?"

A film of caution swept across Pritchett's gaze. "They cost a sight of money; that's all I know about 'em. Who d'you know round this Basin that could sport a pair like that?"

"Young Jordan could," thought Gannon slowly.

"Yeah? Well, you put the name to him—I didn't," Pritchett observed. "If he starts out huntin' a scalp, I'd rather it'd be yours than mine."

Bristol said disbelievingly: "He wouldn't be a-killin' his own paw, would he?"

"Mebbe not," Pritchett muttered. "But he wouldn't mind guttin' a sheepman."

"Well, I don't believe he done it," put in Bristol.

But Gannon wasn't so sure about that. "He might have — might've snuffed Tulare, anyway. He's bull-headed enough, an'—"

"What about that feller, Rago?" broke in Bristol. "He went larrupin' past my place the other night, long about eight o'clock—him an' that tow-headed woman."

Gannon swung round with a curse. "Rago went past here? On the night of Candalero's shindig?"

"He sure did!" Bristol said emphatically. "Me an' Polly both seen 'im."

Gannon took a long breath. "Who was the woman?"

"Never laid eyes on 'em before."

Thrusting hands in pockets Gannon took a turn about the room. He poked his head beyond the faded curtain, but saw nothing incriminating there. He heard a door close softly and swung round like a cat swapping ends.

"Your sheepman's gone," muttered Bristol.

CHAPTER XV

Who Stole the Knife?

HARD BREATHING, wickedly pushed, Gannon's roan plowed through night's curdled black. Somewhere ahead on this climbing trail lay Skunk Tank Ridge and Candalero's Rolling C. The nester's shack was a good half hour behind, lost among these murk-choked miles like Pritchett's horse and the sound of the sheepman's laughter.

Well, let him go, thought Gannon; when he wanted the man he'd know where to find him. He'd never leave his sheep, and there were ninety thousand of them. Next time the guns would tell a different tale.

Consideration of Pritchett was not a thing to soothe one's temper, and reflection on the man's uncanny knowledge was like the bite of a white-hot iron. God damn the fellow's guts! Turbulence roared through Gannon's arteries.

How had Pritchett known about Joe Blanford? For that matter, how had he known after discovery of Tulare's killing that he would find the sheriff at Jordan's ranch? The lousy sheep pool must have dropped a network of spies all across this country to get him information like that. It was too damned bad they hadn't got wind of Tulare's killing!

But it was altogether in the cards that Pritchett had killed Brother Ed himself—he'd ample reason for such killing. And who could say that Pritchett wasn't out to doublecross his crowd? He might have been doing it from the start!

Gannon thought back on what he knew of the man. Cherokee Pritchett had been brother-in-law to the boss of the pool. Ed Tulare's heavy-handed ways had brought about the death of Pritchett's sister—how long ago? Gannon wondered. Pritchett, by his own say-so, had been the one to stumble across Tulare's body. That ahd been, by his own computation, at approximately eleven o'clock on the night of Jordan's killing. He had left his camp—where he'd been alone all evening—in company with the worried Amado at about ten-thirty. Pritchett had intimated he and Amado had been together when they'd discovered the murdered sheep king. But what jury in this Basin would take the word of a sheepherder?

Yes, Pritchett had plainly had both reason and opportunity to avenge his sister's death. Suppose he was out to doublecross the pool? Maybe there was a third faction at work in this Basin; maybe Pritchett was that faction's agent—bought out by it and willing to see the sheep-raisers ruined with the cattlemen if by such ruin he could promote the planned interests of his backers. Say they were after this land; the best, cheapest and quickest way to secure it would be by a range war that would impoverish what few ranchers were not permanently eliminated by flying lead. And if anyone looked out to promote a range war, that man was Pritchett!

TAKE THE burly sheepman's words the first morning Gannon

had met him: "Yeah, I heard they got a deadline. When has a deadline ever stopped sheep?" And again, regarding Tulare's killing: "I began recallin' some of the thing I'd heard about these Basin cowprods; an' the more I recalled, the more sure I was they'd jumped him." And it had been Pritchett who'd dug up that blood-stained handkerchief — and Pritchett who'd brought it up every time its mention looked like doing a deal of damage! Like this morning, and like tonight.

And then when Rago and Hallet had come galloping up with their two punchers that morning, it had been Pritchett who'd sprung on them the news of Jordan's killing. And when he'd riled the cowmen to proper heat, he'd said: "Whyn't you unloose them wolves right now?" trying to taunt them into gunplay.

Always when Pritchett's presence was least called for, the sheepman, like the proverbial bad penny, had come turning up. Take this morning at Red Rock, and tonight at old man Bristol's. At Red Rock he'd laid plenty of pipe to get things rolling, what with telling how the pool had got their Bear Head holdings from a Basin cowman and then flaunting that damned handkerchief in Rago's face! And telling Tug at Bristol's how his sister's handkerchief, all blood smears, had been found by the sheepman's body! And finally that story of the boots, with his ill-hid hints about Tug Jordan.

Well, it might have been Tug Jordan who had done that killing save, as Bristol had pointed out, Tug would hardly have had motive enough to have killed his own old man. True, that telltale heel-mark had been found beside each killing; and it fostered the belief that both men had died by the selfsame hand. But even if the boots were Tug's that didn't prove that Tug had worn them at the fatal time. Tug, in Gannon's opinion, was a hot-headed, careless fool who might have left his boots around most anyplace—good decoys easily stolen for the killer to confuse the issue.

That gouged heel might deliberately have been manufactured by the fellow to furnish evidence against Tug —surely young Jordan—had he been the murderer—would have had more sense than to go tramping round the country in boots that could be tracked back! Certainly Tug would not have implicated his sister with that planted handkerchief found beside the sheepman's stiffened corpse. Nor, if Tug had been the killer, would he have appeared so rude and surly (as Candalero had described him) when questioned upon his arrival at the horse-breeder's by his sister. If Tug had killed Tulare, he'd have been much more apt, Gannon thought, to have been strutting bright and cocky, puffed up by the accomplishment. He hadn't tried to conceal his satisfaction upon learning of the sheepman's death.

Gannon roused to look about him; in the distance saw the lights of Candalero's ranch.

Tennessee was in the back of his mind like a steady, throbbing ache. He could not get shut of it and nothing seemed to ease it. Only one thing in all this land was certain: She was not for him. Engaged to marry that tough-faced Victor Rago. . . .

Thoughts of Rago brought to mind the tow-headed woman seen by Bristol in the rancher's company. Who was she? The company he had been expecting? Where had she come from, and what kind of woman was she to go alone with him in dead of night to an isolated ranch? Or hadn't they gone there?

He would look Vic Rago up tomorrow and pry the truth of the matter out of him.

He wheeled from the clinging darkness into the lighter area of Candalero's ranch yard.

CANDALERO, for a Spaniard, appeared a stiff, unwelcome host. In the cavernous main room of his casa he stood about with all the genial interest of an empty suit of armor while Gannon partook of the refreshments he'd reluctantly trotted out. His men, he said abruptly, were off to Rye to blow their pay checks; he did not expect them back till late tomorrow afternoon. Gannon won-

dered why he'd thought it necessary to mention this. The way he'd brought the matter up looked kind of odd. And all the while Gannon fed his face he felt the Spaniard's covert scrutiny. There was a restlessness upon the man; it marked his every action.

He looked up now and caught a changing light in the watching eyes. "Good year for horses," he offered conversationally. But the horse-breeder only grunted. "Expect you're rai in' 'em for cow ponies, ain't you?"

"Government cavalry," Candalero muttered. He thrust lean hands in his trousers pockets and strode about the room with his mustache bristling.

Recalling the antagonism between this man and Tug, Gannon decided he might as well make the most of it. If there were any dirt on Jordan, he'd get it here or no place.

Lifting his glass, he said: "So Tug didn't do no beaming on your proposed hook-up with his sister, eh?"

Candalero stopped his pacing, stood for a moment stiffly, then whipped his torso clear around. He had a cold narrow look for Gannon. "If it is all the same to you," he said distinctly, "that subject is deestasteful. We will talk of something else."

Gannon set his glass down. "Sure. Shall we talk about her brother?"

"Carajo!" Candalero swore. "That fool?" His shoulders moved impatiently. "What could a man find to talk about in him?" He spread his hands in an irritable gesture and resumed his stalking of the room.

Gannon said, "We might discuss his habits."

"Habits!" Candalero swung round savagely. "He has no habit save to spend time with cards and dice! Caramba—habits!"

In Gannon's mind a thought clicked over, but he kept the fact from his face. He said offhand, "I guess you've played with him too often."

Impatience cracked the set of the Spaniard's cheeks. "It ees not my practice to game with persons who cannot pay their debts."

"King Jordan broke?"

The horse-breeder stared at him. "That man would throw him from the house if he knew w'at I know! Thunders of heaven! he would tear the living belly from him!"

Gannon raised his brows. "Who's Jordan do his playin' with then?"

"Por Dios! Why should you care who he plays with?"

Gannon said, "Well—"

"If you mus' know, he plays with Rago. Rago! Rago! Rago!" spluttered Candalero, growing red in the face. "The man is like an octopus! He has the crazy fool like thees!" He squeezed his right hand round the little finger of his left, and grimaced.

"Through his gambling?"

"What else?"

"But I thought you said he had no mon—"

"He had money till thees Rago took it from him. Muchas dinero! But no more. That Rago has got it all away. An' now he has the . . . w'at-you-call—?"

"I.O.U.'s?"

"Si!" Candalero's nod was emphatic. "It ees because of these papers—" He stopped abruptly, scowling; a deeper red creeping up his neck.

"You mean," said Gannon quickly, "that he's using these papers to force Tennessee into marriage?" He eyed the Spaniard narrowly. "That's blackmail!"

CANDALERO shrugged and went back to his pacing of the floor. "Call it w'at you will; he has got Meez Jordan's promise."

Gannon nodded thoughtfully. Yes, he had that. . . . This business threw a new light on Rago's character—on Tug's character, too. "But I still don't see," he said, "how those papers would get him Jordan's sister."

"Mother of God!" exclaimed the Spaniard. "Look! The girl was oldest— Have you ever seen the way of a girl weeth a younger brother? His mother ees dead. The girl feels the . . . the . . . w'at-you-call so maternal for thees damn' picaro. Thees Rago, he say, has got hees papers. The girl knows what father will say; she agrees for marry Rago—"

"An' you think," said Gannon hotly, "young Tug would let her do it?"

Candalero threw up his hands. "She is doing it—no?"

Gannon sat down in his chair. It looked like Candalero had all the answers. He ran a hand through his yellow hair; rasped the hand across his jaw. "Tug ever play with anybody else?" he asked abruptly.

"Shoemaker—that fellow at Red Rock Spring."

"Lose to that bird, too?"

"Do not ask me; I do not class myself with swine," Jesus Candalero muttered haughtily.

"How much does Tug owe Rago?"

The Spaniard shrugged. He took a final turn about the room and flung himself into a chair. "Poder de Dios! If I but knew some way to ruin that Rago!"

Gannon was staring at him when horse sound stopped in the yard outside. A man's step came toward the door, boots scuffing the hard-packed adobe. Candalero's face looked suddenly gray beneath its bronze; his hands clamped hard on the arms of his chair. Gannon heard the door come open. Candalero's eyes showed panic.

"Say, listen, Jesus—" The visitor's voice broke abruptly off.

Gannon turned.

Ed Shoemaker stood dumbfounded in the open door. Sight of the sheriff seemed to have stopped him like a wire. He got hold of himself and closed his mouth, but didn't get the uneasiness out of his eyes.

Gannon stared at him. "Well," he said, "I see the swine has come to Mahomet. What you doin' here, Shoemaker?"

"Why—uh—I just stopped by t' borrer some tobacco."

"Quite a stop, wasn't it? Your place so low you can't even roll a smoke?"

Shoemaker shifted his eyes. "Wal, no. I wasn't at my place. I—"

"Where were you at?" asked Gannon sharply.

"I— Why, dammit, I was comin' back from Rye, an'—"

"You sure took a long way round!"

Gannon's words and his look proved too much for the bed-slat trader. His eyes got sulky and he closed his mouth up tight.

Gannon chucked a glance at the Spaniard. "Ain't you goin' to ask the little fellow in? He's wantin' some tobacco."

Roan color flowed through Candalero's cheeks. He pulled himself to his feet and stood there, like the wheels of his mind had jammed, fishing blankly through his pockets.

Gannon got up with a hard tight grin. He crossed to the table and, picking up a pound can of tobacco there, shoved it at the Spaniard. "This is what you're huntin' for, ain't it?" There was cold hard mockery in his eyes.

Candalero looked down at the brightly-colored can; it seemed to rouse him suddenly from his trance. He grabbed the can and thrust it at the trader, lips curled back in a bitter grimace.

SHOEMAKER took it and shoved it under an arm. "I'm sure much obliged," he muttered, and swung round toward the door.

"Just a minute," Gannon said. "I want a word with you."

Shoemaker paused in the doorway, the set of his back showing the way of his desires. He hung there an undecided moment, then turned with a sulky, "What fer?"

"You said," Gannon slammed the answer at him, "Tug came into your place the other night at ten!"

"Did I? Musta been thinkin' 'bout somethin' else. 'F you're talkin' about Tug Jordan, he was in my place all evenin'," Shoemaker said with a defiant stare.

"What time," Gannon asked, "did he get there?"

"About eight. Him an' me played cards all evenin'; he never quit my place till after eleven."

The defiance still glowed from Shoemaker's stare, but a scared look played about its edges.

Suddenly he bolted for his horse.

"I think," Gannon said to Candalero, "I'll just spend the night with you."

"As you please," the Spaniard said without much warmth.

Shown a room opening off the patio, Gannon waited until Candalero took his lamp into a room across the way. He slipped his boots off then and soundlessly groped his way back into the room which they had left.

He groped till he reached the table, his mind still retaining its picture of that not-quite-shut drawer. His exploring hand got hold of it, pulled it out a slow-drawn fraction; slipped within.

And closed on bone.

Guardedly he struck a match. The hand he'd taken from the drawer was clamped about the handle of a knife. Dried blood was on its six-inch blade.

CHAPTER XVI

"I'm Comin' Back—!"

CANDALERO got up early—so early, in fact, that the sun had not yet crawled from bed and all the house lay black as a black cat's overcoat. But Gannon got up with him.

Opening his door he stepped into the cold crisp air of the courtyard. Yonder, from the flowing shadows of the hallway, came the soft slap-slap of the horse-breeder's stealthy progress.

The grin that parted Gannon's lips was peculiarly unpleasant. "Just a minute, Jesus. You better have a light."

All sound ahead choked off.

"Strike a light," said Gannon harshly, "or I'll let you have it!"

A moment passed. Then a match flared up to disclose Candalero stiff and moveless with his back to Gannon, three feet from the living-room door.

"Find a lamp," Gannon said, "and no monkey business."

He stood where he was, listening carefully, until the Spaniard found one and, raising its wick, sent yellow brilliance raveling into all the room's far corners. Then he strode in after him and slammed the door.

Candalero stood by the table, the burnt match still shaking in his hand.

"Sit down," ordered Gannon grimly. And the Spaniard, roan color rousing in his cheeks, pulled himself two inches straighter. "Please have the goodness," he said huskily, "to explain thees—tees strange behavior."

"It struck me you was gettin' up a sight too early."

"Indeed!" Candalero's piercing glance flashed darkly. "Thees is an outrage! Nombre de Dios! mus' a man time his rising to a sheriff's fancy?"

"A smart man would." Gannon's grin was ominous. He took the knife from his pocket, drove its point deep into the table and stared across its vibrating handle into Candalero's eyes.

The pupils of these eyes went round and bitter. Candalero put one hand against the wall, and the last bit of color pulsed slowly from his cheeks. He stood there stiffly, staring like a man gone blind.

"Where'd you get it?" Gannon said.

The Spaniard roused himself with a visible effort. His glance passed dully round the room as though he scanned familiar things for the final time. He ran his tongue across dry lips. "I—I don't know."

Gannon's grin was cold and mocking.

Candalero seemed suddenly old. "It—it is the truth," he muttered. "Last night—just before you came, I found it in this drawer." He passed a shaking hand across his eyes, ran it irritably through his hair and stood with it tightly pressed against the back of his neck, white teeth faintly gleaming through his parted lips.

Gannon said: "You got that knife at Box O D. That stuff is blood. That's the blade you drove through Jordan's back!"

A grimace crossed the Spaniard's face; left it twisted, drawn. "No! No—" he shook his head. "I did not kill that—"

"Your knife, ain't it?"

The Spaniard's tongue crossed feverish lips. "It is—" the black eyes shone like polished glass "—not mine."

"Then whose is it?" Gannon shouted.

Candalero put a hand before his face. "I do not know, senor."

Gannon's smile was a cold, bright thing. "D'you know what happens," he said narrowly, "to fellows that drive knives through other men's backs? D'you know what they do to 'em over to Yuma?"

The Spaniard's shoulders cringed. "Do you?"

"God's Blood!" cried Candalero desperately. "I did not kill him!"

Gannon stared at him; saw the sweat standing out like blobs of jelly across his forehead. "What did Shoemaker come here for?"

The Spaniard's chin went down upon his chest, and a great sigh welled from somewhere deep within him. He lifted his head and flung back Gannon's glance with a weary hopelessness. "What use to ask me that, senor? You heard him plain as I did." He dropped to a chair and sprawled there limply. "He asked for tobacco—"

"Tobacco. Yeah. I know well what he asked for! What I asked you is what he wanted!"

The Spaniard's cheeks turned dour, rebellious. He did not open his mouth.

"By God, you better not try gettin' out of this country!" Gannon gritted. "You ain't goin' to stir one blinkin' step till I get the truth of this business outa you!"

Candalero sneered, then locked his lips in sullen silence.

Gannon's eyes showed a lifted temper; at his sides the big fists hung like lumps of battered lead. But these did not unloose the clamped white grip of the Spaniard's stubborn lips—it seemed that nothing could do that.

Each muscle in the sheriff's body ached, so great was his desire to maul that look from the horse-breeder's face; to make him spill his guts. But you couldn't kill a guy for refusing to admit he'd killed somebody else!

With a snort built up of all these things he started for the door. "Don't think you're done with me," he snarled across a shoulder. "I'm comin' back an' fry you to a cinder!"

He was almost at the door when a whisper of escaping breath came from the Spaniard and something chunked with a wicked whir into the lintel above the door.

That knife! His lifting eyes saw it on the instant. A terrible anger drove him round, cheeks awash with violence.

Jesus Candalero shivered.

When Gannon quit the place long minutes later, every stick of furniture was reduced to splintered kindling, the knife was back in his pocket, and Candalero was in no kind of shape to travel without plenty of assistance.

CHAPTER XVII

Hell Breaks Loose

DAWN had come with desert swiftness while Gannon moved up Sorrel Horse Canyon toward Vic Rago's Flying M. He rode with a rifle ready across his knees and the flush of recent emotions not quite gone from his wind-whipped cheeks. But for all these things the steel-hard burr of his gaze scraped up the settling dust of an earlier rider's progress, warning him that this advance was not to go unheralded.

The canyon gradually widened out, throwing up red crumbling banks whose crests stood sharp against the brightening sky. Yonder, hemmed by this rimming rust, he saw the buildings of the Rago ranch.

They lay spread out like old mud boxes in a yard completely bare. A horse, ground-hitched before the snorting post fronting a wide veranda, added its story to the sum-total of Gannon's mounting knowledge.

He bent his course toward that veranda, and when he got there, swung from the roan's broad back and went directly up the steps. The butt of a tight-clenched pistol drove harsh echoes through the door.

"Come in," a man's deep voice growled curtly.

They were ready for him; that first quick raking glance was proof of this. The place was black with the

shapes of waiting men. Kelstane Burac faced him with his upper body bent beside the left-hand wall. Along the right lounged Calhoun, Autwine and one of the hands he'd seen with Rago the other morning; these men stood hipshot, with the heels of their right hands draped over gun-butts. Rago, a half smile frozen on his lips, sat behind a desk with his yellow eyes shades brighter than polished amber.

Gannon raked another glance across this crew and grinned. He'd guessed it would be like this when he'd smelled that dust out on the trail. Everything was cut to patterns and the patterns seldom varied. Very soon this scene would shift and there would be a change in values. He could see quite clear whose stock was going down.

He said: "How are you, Gannon? Pull up a chair an' squat."

Gannon was not deceived. Voice dry, he said, "I can take mine standing up, I guess," and thrust his pistol back in leather. "Your record, Vic, of your movements on the night of Candalero's party, ain't exactly what I'd call . . . inclusive. Seems like you forgot to mention a certain ride. You forgot to mention that tow-headed woman, too. I want to know why."

Rago looked at him, loud and brash with his answer. "I didn't reckon it was any of your business!"

"An' you don't think so yet, eh?" Gannon murmured. "Let me tell you, Vic, that anything you do will be my business—long as I'm packin' this star."

"You ain't goin' to be packin' it a hell of a while longer," Rago sneered.

"Mebbe; mebbe not. I've kind of got a hunch you're right. But long as I'm packin' it, you better tell the truth when I ask a question. I want to know who that woman was, an'—"

"You'll not find out from me!"

Gannon considered him. "I think I will," he said, and raked another look across those men along the walls. His gaze snapped back; beat hard against Vic Rago's sullen face. "How far you want to go with this? You yearning to pass out with your boots on?"

Vic Rago paled—then swore. "You crazy fool!" he blustered. "You got no more chance of cuttin' this than a snowball has in hell! These boys'll drop you like a burnin' stick!"

Gannon nodded. "But I'll be droppin' you," he said. "You better think it over. You'll make a damn' poor bridegroom stretched out on a shutter."

Rago's half smile melted. You could almost see it dripping off his chin. Then remembrance of these others ran a red wave up his neck. Fury sprang from his lips and sent its poison roaring through him, and he surged to his feet with a strangled oath.

"Wait! Wait!" cried a muffled voice, and the back door of this room burst open. The tow-headed woman stood poised on the threshold, a hand at her breast; her blue eyes anxious, frightened. "Wait!" She thrust a fearful hand out toward them.

Gannon waited, and the others waited with him. A half-shamed look washed across Calhoun's stiff cheeks.

"Now, Dixie, you shouldn't have come bustin' into this like that."

It was Rago's voice; fretted, relieved and angry all at once.

She was an older woman than Gannon had expected; a woman no longer young. Her features, showing distress now, showed as well how little she had known of common happiness—a hungry face, somehow reminding him of the nester, Bristol's. She said to Rago: "Do you think I want to see men killed because of me?"

"That sheriff?" the Flying M owner sneered. "Hell, he wasn't killin' no one—we had that buzzard dead to rights! You bein' here ain't changed anything a fraction. He was only usin' you to get a hold on me. I wish to gawd you'd let the damned thing finish!" And he looked malevolently at Gannon.

"It's a poor wish," Gannon told him. "You'd 'a' been plunkin' a angel harp by now."

He turned to the woman, uneasy suddenly; stirred by something half-

guessed; fearful lest it be the truth. "Who are you, ma'am?"

"You leave her be," snarled Rago. "She ain't mixed up in this an' don't concern you."

"I guess I'll be the judge of that," said Gannon coolly. "It's time I was gettin' the truth from someone, an' I reckon I'd take her word for things a powerful sight quicker'n I would yours." He put his glance on the woman again. He realized now that her hair was gray; Bristol hadn't been far wrong, even though it was nearly dark when he had seen her. "Suppose you tell me who you are, ma'am."

"I—I'm Dixie Duncan," she answered hesitantly. "Dixie Jordan, that was. I—I'm Tennessee Jordan's mother."

Gannon sighed. It was what he'd been afraid of. "I guess you'd better explain that—"

"C-Couldn't I talk this over with you privately?"

Gannon's ironic glance passed round the room, taking in those staring others. "It don't look like I'm goin' to be very private round this place, ma'am. Unless Mister Rago's willin' to clear out—an' take his hired guns with him? . . . I expect you'll have to do your talkin' the way things are."

He watched her look at Rago. "Victor—can't you?" He saw Rago scowl. Rago thought he had him in a jackpot and was loath to let the chance slip out of his hands.

Then Rago saw Cash Gannon's grin. Color flashed from his cheeks again. He smothered whatever it was he'd been about to say. "All right," he grumbled. "I reckon we can stand outside for half a minute or so." He started for the door. "C'mon," he growled over a shoulder.

Reluctantly the others gave up their places.

Tennessee's mother said, "You stay with us, Victor," pleadingly.

So "Victor" stayed, much to Gannon's grim pleasure.

"All right," Gannon said. "Let's have it."

"Twenty-one years ago—it seems like yesterday," she said, "I married King Jordan. He was plain Sam Jordan, then. I guess we got along about as well as most young couples. For a while, at any rate. Then Sam took to drinking. He spent a lot of time in town. Tennessee was born. Sam was some put out she hadn't been a boy—a boy being what he'd wanted. But he reckoned he'd try again. Another girl was born—born dead, as it fortunately turned out. But he was pretty disgusted anyway and took to drinking worse than ever. Things finally came to such a pass that I threatened to leave him if he didn't mend his ways.

"He stopped then for a while. But when he started again, life for me became a constant bender. Then one night when he was sore about losing a lot of money some way, he threw that girl business up to me again; said it was just his luck to get a woman like me—that all that could be got from me was girls, and spindlin' ones, at that! It was the final straw. I left him. It was fifteen years ago today. The court gave him custody of Tennessee; he got that done to spite me."

"What about young Tug?"

"He's none of my flesh," she said bitterly.

"After the divorce you went back home, I guess . . . Phoenix? How does it happen, then, you're up here now?"

She said bitterly: "If you only knew the ache that's in me sometimes—the ache of a mother longing for her flesh and blood. I—I couldn't stand it any longer. I came up here to see my child."

Gannon looked at her.

She flushed and said defiantly: "I meant no harm. I didn't even intend to let her know who I was—I was to be an aunt of Victor's, visiting him. Don't you—"

"I wasn't thinkin' about that," Gannon interrupted. He looked at her searchingly. "Didn't you know King Jordan is dead?"

Her cheeks went pale as ashes. "Jordan . . . dead—" Her eyes were big and almost black. She looked at Rago wonderingly; strangely, Gan-

non thought. "Why didn't you tell me, Victor?"

He said gruffly: "Hell, I didn't want to go gettin' you all upset. Wa'n't nothing you could do about it, was there?"

Gannon cut in. "Have you seen Tennessee, ma'am?"

Rago said, "I ain't had a chance to fix anything up, yet. Too much been goin' on account of them murders. 'F you was any kind of a sheriff," he scowled at Gannon, "you'd 'a' had that killer behind the bars—"

"Then you believe," asked Gannon blandly, "both these killings the work of the same red hand?"

"Ah-h—I wasn't talkin' about that lousy wool-grower," Rago sneered. "I'm takin' about the guy that bumped off Jordan—"

"Yeah? Well, while you're talking, suppose you talk a few things about what you were doing on that trail that passes Bristol's cabin with the lady here when, accordin' to what you told me the other day, you were right here at the ranch all evening!"

"But he was here all evening, if you're speaking about the day I came," protested the ex-Mrs. Jordan. "He came down to Tonto Basin for me in the afternoon, and we went straight to the ranch here. This man Bristol, that you mentioned, must have seen us on the way."

"What time'd you get here?"

Rago said, "About eight-thirty."

"That would have brought you past the nester's shack about eight. And," said Gannon pointedly, "past the place where Tulare got his light snuffed at somethin' a little after. He was killed," he added ominously, "between eight and eight-twenty."

"Well, Victor didn't kill him," declared Tennessee's mother emphatically. "I was with him all the while until I went to bed around eleven."

"Victor" flashed her a grateful look. Before he could open his mouth, however, Gannon chucked in a fast one. "How much," he asked very softly, "have you taken young Tug down the road for?"

Rago's burly shoulders divorced all movement. His yellow eyes went over Gannon narrowly. "Am I supposed to laff?"

"Not unless you're pretty well covered up. You been playin' a lot of cards with Tug, and I've got plenty of reliable testimony on the subject. Burac an' Calhoun just pulled their freight. Autwine left three minutes ago. So, unless you're feelin' mighty brash, you better unlimber an answer —an' see that it's a true one, too."

A dark scowl disrupted the satisfied set of Rago's features. He flashed a quick glance toward where Dixie Duncan was pleating folds in a dress that wasn't supposed to have any, and said something under his breath.

"Come on," said Gannon grimly. "How much?"

"Five or six thousand," Rago muttered. "I don't know exactly." He tried to bolster his position with bluster. "What the hell of it? That ain't got nothin' to do with these damn' killin's—"

"It's got a lot to do with your marryin' Tennessee Jordan, though!"

Anger polished Rago's glance and rushed dark color across his face. His big fists clenched and he came half a step forward.

Gannon's thin lips streaked a smile. "Keep right on comin," he said grimly, "if you want to get that weddin' of yours postponed."

It stopped the Flying M owner like a leveled pistol. Most of the color went out of his face. Then he swung on a bootheel and started for the door.

"No use you hustlin' out to call in help," remarked Gannon comfortably. "That puncher of yours ain't there no longer, either. Your entire army has hit the trail."

Rago wheeled a paid of mottled cheeks. "All right. You're so damned cocky, I'm goin' to tell you somethin': I guess it'll take you down a peg to learn that Candalero threw that jamboree of his the other night for just one reason—to give them stinkin' sheepmen a chance to shove their blattin' bla-blas across King Jordan's range!"

"Why didn't they do it, then?"

"I ain't in with 'em," Rago sneered.

"But if you're so lathered t' know who murdered Jordan, you better find which one of 'em spent the evenin' skulkin' round his place!"

"Jordan wasn't murdered on his place—"

"What the hell you talkin' about? Tug Jordan found him sprawled on the livin' room floor!"

"Sprawled there, yeah—but packed there on horseback from the place where he got that knife. If you'd use the eyes God gave you, you'd have noticed the lack of blood on that livin' room carpet!"

GANNON HAD PLENTY to think about as he jogged down the trail toward Box O D—plenty! For one thing, Vic Rago—if Dixie Duncan's story could be trusted—could now be eliminated as a suspect in connection with the sheepman's killing; and probably with regard to Jordan's wind-up, also. If he'd gone to Tonto Basin after Dixie, he'd had his hands a sight too full to have been chasing round the country snuffing people's lights.

Gannon got to thinking about the woman, then. He could understand her wanting to see her daughter—that was a natural motherly feeling; but it did seem a bit queer, her not knowing about King Jordan's death.

He could see now why Ed Shoemaker had stopped last night at the Spaniard's ranch. Candalero was trailing bets with the sheepmen, and Shoemaker—who, to judge by his looks, would probably do business with a snake if it brought him profit—had dropped by to perfect maneuvers. Small wonder the two had been uneasy; they'd not be wanting their connection with Tulare and Pritchett to be rumored round this country! Gannon wondered how Vic Rago had caught on.

Not that it made any difference. There was just one thing Gannon wanted out of Rago; and that was those I.O.U.'s that Tug had given him.

He cast a look southeastward where Juniper Mountain and Mistake Peak reared their rugged crests above the dun terrain; and farther off to where old Bear Head cocked an eye across Juniper's shoulder. Off there was the land now owned by this blamed Alamagordo Pool—the place they aimed to push these ninety thousand sheep. It was a bitter thought. He wondered what had kept them from crossing their flocks the night of Candalero's party.

He wondered other things, too. But on the credit side he felt he had the killer's identity shaping up pretty nicely. A few more facts, or the correct interpretation put to facts already in his possession, and he'd have that fellow standing in the shadow of the noose. He was pretty well satisfied by this time that a single man had done both killings. And if that were the case, the killer could be but one of four known men. The thought of Tennessee having steeped her hands in blood could not be squared with his conscience—nor wih Tennessee's character as he knew it.

No—it had to be one of those four men! Three of them hated sheep and sheepmen bitterly; two, at least, had had plenty reason to hate King Jordan; all of them had had the opportunity.

Candalero he had cleared, for the obvious reason that no man, were he the killer, would have been fool enough to put that knife where Jesus seemed to have put it. Nor would he have been caught with such a weak-kneed alibi as the one the Spaniard had thought fit to offer. It was too damned weak to be anything but the truth—unless, of course, the man were a deal more subtle than Gannon believed this Hackberry killer to be.

No—it had to be one of those four men. Pritchett, Hallet, young Tug, or Kelstane Burac. And of them all—despite those things he had against Cherokee Pritchett — Gannon was commencing to believe the likeliest man for the role of killer was peppery Shorty Hallet!

He wished he were as near a solution to this sheep and cattle business. This, he thought, was what was going to nail his hide to Blandford's fence! Pritchett, it seemed, was determined to take his sheep to that

land beyond old Bear Head; and to do so—since no roads crossed the Basin proper—he must either go north by the road around Chalk Mountain, or southwest along Gun Creek to its junction with the Tonto, and thence down Tonto till an eastern swing toward Macdonald Canyon should prove feasible.

He looked ahead to where the buildings of Box O D lay sweltering in the mid-day sun. His glance went suddenly narrow. That place looked damned deserted! Then he saw the cook waving a shirt calamitously, and with a smoking oath put spurs to his bronc.

The cook was shouting something. But not until Gannon pulled to a slithering, dust-raising stop, could he make out the fellow's words.

He got them then, all right!

"—git down there an' stop them nitwits! Tonto's white with blattin' sheep, an' Hallet—the damn fool—has gone an' blowed his head off!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"God Help You, Pritchett!"

"HALLET!" Gannon stiffened. The rumble of the avalanche was in his ears. He could see his house of cards a-totter; in a moment all those fine conclusions would come tumbling like the walls of Jericho. He stared through the cook and beyond him—he did not even see the man. "You're sure?" His voice was hoarse.

"That Hallet's blowed his head off? Hell, yes! One of his boys come by not hardly thirty minutes ago—but never mind him! Git out there an' stop them fools from shootin' up the sheep crowd!"

Right—that was the biggest worry now.

Gannon whirled the roan on its haunches, filling the air with a hollow booming as he drove the bronc across the bridge. The cook's slammed yell came after him: "Some place north of Kayler Butte! Boys left not ten minutes ago!"

"Ten minutes!" Gannon gritted the words out bitterly. He'd be just that many minutes too late. The guns were popping now. He could hear them through the beating of his horse's hoofs.

He wondered who could be leading the Box O D crowd. Autwine? The range boss might have gotten back in time for that—if he'd come straight back. Or Tug! Young Tug hadn't been at Rago's.

This was just his cursed luck! Just when he'd got to figuring he was getting things well in hand, this damn range war had to break! There was just one chance: If he could stop it—Damn! But if it got beyond control, he could see right now Blanford wouldn't be in any kind of mood for alibis.

With tight-clamped lips, he spurred the roan. This was no time to think about horseflesh. The sheriff's freedom hung in the balance with the lives of the Basin ranchers. These damn back-country cow-wallopers thought they were hell for gunplay—but they didn't know what real gunplay was like! Wait until Pritchett's big Chihuahua greasers started unlimbering their .30-.30's! Those birds were fighters from the drop of a hat. They'd spent most of their lives fighting one thing or another, and Tulare'd probably taught them to hate cowmen so bad they could taste it! One thing was certain: They weren't going to lose four hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of sheep without having something to say about it!

Kayler Butte lay ahead to the right, stark in the blistering sunlight. The sound of firing was much plainer now, rising clear above the drumming thud of the pony hoofs.

Then Gannon was sweeping round a bend, and between the Tonto and those sharp cleaved flanks of Kayler Butte the land loomed like a gray wool blanket—sheep as far as the eye could see!

His stare narrowed down to the field of battle and a bitter curse squeezed through his lips. Just as he had figured, those damn punchers were getting what they'd asked for. Three of them down already, two more, afoot, crouched behind rock

rubble, blasting away like kids with their first air-rifles, and the rest of them huddled in a knot beyond good range, brandishing useless weapons and looking ugly while they tried to plan some way of turning the tables.

Yonder black dots showed where the fighting sheepmen sat their horses awaiting Box O D's next move. But they'd not wait long. They had the best guns for long-range shooting and dropping fool punchers was pretty good sport—like big-game hunting, only better. Those wild Chihuahua Yaquis would think no more of knocking a man hell-for-breakfast than they would of gutting an antelope. They'd been dropping men all their lives back home.

Gannon spurred up to the group of punchers and jerked the roan back on its haunches. "Who's in charge here?"

A rider pushed his horse from the others. "I am," It was Tennessee. "Mr Autwine said—"

"Autwine, eh? Don't you know better than to take that fellow's advice?" Gannon was hot with anger and he did not pick his words. "Why, he's thrown in with these sheepmen. Don't you see you're playing right into their hands?"

"I can see," she answered sharply, "they mean to cross our range! My father would never have let them—and I shan't let them, either!"

Autwine grinned across her shoulder. "That's tellin' you, bucko. I guess you know your place around here now!"

Gannon snapped a hard glance at him, but no retort. He said to Tennessee. "I'll have no more of this blood-lettin'—"

"Yeah," sneered Autwine, breaking in. "The biggest blood-letter in sixteen counties can't stand havin' other guys steal his thunder."

"What do you mean by that crack?" Gannon snapped, kneeing his horse beside the other.

Autwine thrust his dark jowls forward. "You ain't loadin' me none, bucko. You might fool the rest of these Basin cowprods—but I know why the Gov'nor sent you down here! An' I know the kinda squeeze Big Joe used to make you take the job! You an' your gawdamighty airs! You're nothin' but a hired-gun hombre! I know all about that rancher down to Freestone— Stand back!" A gun was in his fist. "You put those hands on me again, an' as God's my witness I'll let you have it!"

Gannon licked dry lips. The temptation was strong within him to rip and smash and batter—to pound that sneering face until his muscles would respond no longer. But the gun in Autwine's hand was gripped too firm to be overlooked. The first move he might make would bring hot lead crashing through his vitals.

Yet even so it took the last grim ounce of his will power to let that fleeting taunt ride past unchallenged.

He backed the roan with a pressure of his knees. With the strain of his desires gnawing deeper lines in the slanting of his cheeks, he wheeled to face the girl. "Miss Tennessee, I'm asking you to call this off—to let me find if I can settle this without more gunplay. . . ." His words trailed off, the curling of her lips sufficient answer.

She said: "Do you think I could abide myself if I quit now? What of those three dead men out there? —good boys every one of them; boys who died out of loyalty to their salt." Her voice cut at him. "For a man with a past like yours, you seem almighty scared of gunplay! What's the matter with you — lost your nerve? What a pity! But never mind; you just ride along about your business, Mister Gannon; we'll take care of—"

"You little fool!" he said. "Those sheepmen will lick the pants off your outfit! Now you get these cow-wallopers out of here or I'll put the whole damn bunch of you in jail! An' if it happens I'm scared, the state militia'll do it for me!"

Whirling his bronc he went loping toward the sheep.

PRITCHETT came forward with a big Chihuahua Yaqui; Pritchett's eyes were smoky. "A fine kettle of fish, by Gawd! Thought you

said there wouldn't be no range war?" He stared at Gannon bitterly. "You tol' me I could cross this range—said you'd back me to the limit. Is this your damned limit? I been tryin' to give you some cooperation. What kinda cooperation you givin' me? We get the sheep down here, an' this bloody bunch of scrub-cow-raisers come tearin' into us like Santa Anna at the Alamo! By Gawd, they belly-ache about their rights— I'll have you know I got some rights around here, too!"

"You got no right crossin' Jordan range. I said to stick to the public roads—"

"Listen—" Pritchett growled. "I got as much right on this damn grass as any man in the Basin. Jordan range! Don't make me laugh! King Jordan never saw the day he owned a foot—"

"Jordan range," Gannon told him coldly, "runs clear to the Mazatzal Mountains."

"Jordan range, mebbe; but there's a strip each side of the Tonto half a mile wide that Jordan never paid a dollar for! I know, for I took the trouble to look. I guess he figured havin' land both sides of it gave him that chunk in the middle without no title. Mebbe it does round here—but not in the land recorder's office! He can keep it for all of me, but by Gawd I'm goin' to cross it!"

"You mean to say," said Gannon, staring, "this ground we're standin' on's public domain?"

"You're damn' well right it is," snarled Pritchett. "As they'll find out if they want to keep this up! I've lost one man already—Chato Amado—an' somebody'll damn well go to the pen for it! I've got ninety thousand sheep in this bunch, an' by Gawd, if those fools stampede 'em, I'll take this stinkin' Basin apart an' throw away the pieces!"

Gannon took his hat off and wiped a hand across his forehead. Putting the felt back on, he said. "You had a chance to sneak your flocks across this Basin the night Candalero threw that party. Why the hell didn't you do it?"

"Because it's too damn wide. I got ninety thousand sheep an' I ain't fool enough to think I could get 'em all across between a single dark an' dawn. Besides, I'd found out by then about this gap in Jordan-owned land. I says to Ed, 'Let's wait a while till this sheriff gets here. If he'll back us in our rights we'll shove the sheep across Jordan's range by way of that strip along the Tonto.' Tulare agreed with me for once, and we let the chance slide by. Hell, I'm not a man to start a fight when I can get my way without it. Fights cost money; and in this sheep business money means something."

"How'd you know I was comin' down here?"

"You didn't think you could keep that secret, did you? That pal of yours, the Governor, has been tellin' all his friends at the statehouse. 'Rest easy, boys,' he says; 'there'll be no Hackberry ruckus. I've sent Cash Gannon down there. Good ol' Gannon—he'll keep the lid on for us.'"

An ache got into Gannon's muscles. He felt like leaving these Basin cow-raisers to stew in their own damn juice; he felt like riding down to Phoenix and ramming his star down Big Joe Blanford's throat!

But instead he said to Pritchett, "I'll do my best for you. Because the law is on your side an' I've sworn an oath to uphold it. But you keep these sheep right where they are until tomorrow morning. I've got to make these cowmen see things sensibly, an' it's goin' to take a little time. It won't be no easy chore with these dead punchers layin' out here. God help you, Pritchett, if you're lyin' about that Tonto strip!"

CHAPTER XIX

Skyline Riders

GANNON FOUND the Box O D bunch gathered about three freshly filled graves in a grove of alder back of the big main house. "The first thing I want to know," he said dismounting from his heaving roan, "is whether or not anyone saw Hallet shoot himself."

They faced him grimly, many of

the men with sullen looks upon their reddened faces. They were not thanking him for his interference with their raid upon the sheep. And the fact that the Jordan crew had lost three men to the sheepmen's one did not tend to make their mood less ugly. Only the cook looked on Gannon with anything like approval, and even he was scowling.

"We're not here to discuss any bunch-quitter," young Tug spat out scathingly. "We're here to lay some pipe for evenin' things with them wool-growers!"

Gannon said, "I want—"

"I don't give a damn what you want, sir!" Tug snapped belligerently. "I—"

"But the state militia will when I've talked to the Governor," said Gannon coldly, playing that joker for what it was worth. "I'm getting a little fed up with the way you folks are managing to block me at every step; not only you, but the rest of these Basin cow-raisers. An' it's come to the point where I'll stand precious little more of it."

He caught the sneer on Autwine's lips. He said brashly, with his eyes hard on the man: "So there'll be no misunderstanding, let me say right now that I'll plug the first man I catch interfering with those sheep."

The sullen lines gnawed deeper in those watching faces. The girl's glance rode across him scornfully. It hurt; but he was past the place where her reactions held power to sway him. He was Blanford's pawn—a white chip in a no limit game.

Autwine's sneer, a little twisted, was still upon his lips.

Gannon said: "You heard me. I mean exactly what I said. You better leave those sheep alone."

"Then get 'em off of Jordan land, and get 'em off it quick!" Tug cried.

"They're not on Jordan land."

"What the hell you talkin's about?" Tug snarled. "Jordan land runs clear to the Mazatzals!"

"Does it?" Gannon eyed him quietly. "Can you show title to all that land?"

"By Gawd, he's right!" the cook broke the startled silence. "I recollect now King never took papers on a strip along the Tonto— Why, cripes! there must be a mile-wide swath of gover'ment land runnin' smack-dab through this whole damn' spread!"

WITH A fresh bronc between his legs, Gannon once again was hurrying to Pritchett's camp. He rode with the unpleasant reflection that he was little more than messenger in a drama he should be directing. He had at last secured Tennessee's reluctant permission for the pool's white horde to proceed across the range. But even in the scoring of this partial victory he could see how he had lost. For even if Rago could be made to relinquish his hold upon the Jordans, Tennessee's hand was not for him. Autwine had—in the vernacular—spilled his guts, and his spleen would not have been complete without acquainting her of Gannon's past—and with that business of the Freestone rancher. For Autwine, too, had aspirations, and his haddock stare was on this spread.

Tennessee would never understand how Gannon's oath had placed him in the role of sheepman's friend. To her this whole vast country was unbroken Jordan land; she could not see it any other way. To her, as to all women, the entries in a land recorder's journal must be cold, indifferent figures; things scratched carelessly with a pen, of poor significance when stood beside the facts of things as she must see them. Long as she could remember, King Jordan had controlled this range; the crossing of these sheep to her must seem a mighty sacrilege, and that Gannon had used the threat of bringing in state militia to gain his way in the matter would, to her, be unforgivable. Trust Autwine to twist the facts to his own best advantage.

And even viewed in the brightest light, that permission to track the flocks across this land was a thing for little joy. The permission was contingent on Pritchett's getting those ninety thousand sheep off Jordan range within a flat ten hours, a feat that would take some doing.

Gannon grimaced; turned his mind

to other things. He had time to think again of Hallet's sudden demise. The fellow had probably seen the noose closing in on him and, in a paroxysm of fear, had taken his own life rather than await his fate at the State's grim hands.

And yet, somehow, this theory had a hollow ring. What was it Pritchett had said yesterday at Red Rock? —Oh, yes! "This Alamagordo Pool owns land over there; a raft of it." And Calhoun had come out of his reverie with: "No Basin man would sell—" And right there Pritchett had cut him off with the statement, "A Basin man did sell it to us!"

A far more dangerous piece of information than it had seemed to Gannon yesterday. He found himself wondering now if Burac, Calhoun and Rago had not glimpsed its implication instantly. No one save Hallet had owned any land that they could sell around Bear Head Mountain. East of Bear Head Canyon was all Hallet range.

Hallet had sold these cowmen down the river in his efforts to get even with King Jordan. Hallet, then, must have been a fool to resort to murder after that....

Gannon smothered an oath. It was suddenly plain to him that Hallett had not been the killer of Tulare and King Jordan. Someone else had committed those crimes! Yet who but Burac, Calhoun and Rago had known of Hallet's treachery? One of these must have used that shotgun on the boss of the XYZ!

It was a startling thought.

It did not prove that Hallet's killer was the Hackberry wholesaler; on the other hand, it did not prove he wasn't. It was altogether possible — though for different reasons—that the same one man had killed all three. Once give a man a taste of murder and chances were he'd go hog-wild.

And if the same man had killed Hallet, Tulare and Jordan, that man must be Kelstane Burac! For Calhoun had not the opportunity to have murdered either of the latter, and Rago—unless Dixie Duncan were lying—could not have killed Tulare.

There was, though, concerning Hallet's death, another notion stirring in the sheriff's mind. Take Pritchett, now. The man had had plenty reason for bumping off Tulare. He might, knowing what he did of this free land crossing Jordan range, have gone to the cattle king suggesting some friendly settlement whereby he could get his flocks across the Box O D without hard feelings. Such an interview might have been Jordan's reason for returning to the ranch that night.

Gannon, however, had become convinced that Jordan had never reached his ranch that night alive. Somewhere between where he had left his punchers and the Box O D headquarters, Jordan had turned aside, or had been stopped, and killed. Gannon could not get that lack of blood on the living room carpet out of mind. If the cattle king had been killed in the house there would have been stains—plenty of them—on that rug. Actually he had found but three or four drops. The heel-mark on the veranda had been made in one of these as the killer carried his victim in to the house.

This did not remove, however, the possibility that Pritchett might have bumped into Jordan someplace on the trail.

He wished now he had gone over that trail more carefully. Still, a killer clever enough to have switched those boots would hardly have been likely to have left any giveaway sign upon the trail.

To get on with this Pritchett theory, King Jordan, after hearing what the sheepman had to say, might have turned him down in such a manner that Pritchett, enraged, had gone berserk and killed him out of hand. As for Hallet, Pritchett might have seen how that man's death—if not deemed suicide—would be laid to a cowman's door. He might have killed him for that very reason.

But Burac—Kelstane Burac looked at least as good a bet.

Gannon's shoulders described a reckless gesture. To hell with this damned sorry mess! What good were theories when every one of them had

to be grounded on a mile-long string of ifs!

Kayler Butte lay on his right; the sheep camp dead ahead. He kicked his bronc to a gallop.

Pritchett met him on the run. "Pull that horse, you fool! You want to scare these goddam sheep?"

Cash Gannon, stopping, said: "Use your words a little careful when you throw them out at me. Backing you ain't put me in no coveted light. It's not too late—even yet—to throw this star in a boghole."

Pritchett grinned. "You'll not be throwing that star away, friend. Not while Blanford's watchin' you! How does it feel to be a governor's fish-caught?"

Gannon got off his horse. He started for the sheepman with both fists knotted. Pritchett, backing hastily, jerked his gun. "You've come about far enough, Cash. I heard what you done to Autwine. I'm not takin' that treatment off of any man. Stop right where you are"

Gannon stopped, but his eyes were very bright. "Take that crack back, or I'll be droppin' you, gun or no gun!"

"Sure I'll take it back," Pritchett said, and put his gun away. "What you need's a bigger sense of humor. You're lettin' this business get in your hair. You want to sit 'way off an' take a nice large view of the situation. In a manner of speakin', you're standin' in the same kinda boots as me—you can't afford to let this business get you down."

"'F you're all through gassin'," Gannon said, "suppose you answer a couple questions. Your pool bought its land from Hallet, didn't it?"

The sheepman nodded, eyeing Gannon curiously. "Yeah. It was a damn' good deal for him. He sold that land for a good six times what it cost him."

He threw a look at the big-hatted men who'd come running up. "Get up the sheep an' start 'em movin'. We got just ten hours to get 'em off this range. Line 'em out for Bear Head pronto."

He turned back to Gannon as the pelados went hurrying off.

"He won't get a deal of pleasure out of that money," Gannon said. "He was found this afternoon with his head blown off."

Pritchett's face showed no remorse. "I was hoping somebody'd get him. God must rate a bunch-quitter three shades lower than a snake."

"Is that as low," Gannon asked, "as a sheepman?"

Pritchett's cheeks showed a touch of color. But he grinned. "I guess that puts us even. What was your other question?"

"I've decided not to ask it."

Pritchett shrugged. "Did you know that woman who was stayin' at Rago's?"

"I know who she is—"

"Then you're gettin' close. She's gone," he added thoughtfully.

"Gone?" Gannon's surprise crept past his guard. "Gone where?"

"Quien sabe—as my herders say. One of the boys saw her drivin' off in a spring wagon early this morning."

"I saw her this morning myself—"

"This was about eight-thirty. Did you see her after that?"

Gannon shook his head, concealing his thoughts from the sheepman's watchful gaze.

"If I was sure that I was right," Pritchett grunted, "I'd kill the little rat!"

Gannon looked at him, probingly, lips stretched tight across his teeth. But there was nothing to be read upon that highboned, copper countenance. If Pritchett suspected someone, it was evident he intended keeping the man's identity to himself.

THE SHEEPMAN observed Gannon's close regard. The cold grin toughened his face again. He said, "I'll tell you this much: They got Ed first. Jordan was either an afterthought or else he butted in on the business an' they gave him a ticket to shut his mouth."

"How do you know that?" asked Gannon quickly.

"Well, I didn't say nothin' before, but when I was pokin' around the scene of Ed's killin', those tracks were considerable plainer than they

were when you come over. I found evidence that the killer—somebody anyway, same horse, was around there twice that night. The first time, I reckon, he killed Ed. The second time he came to swap those boots."

Gannon did some quick figuring, trying to think who it was the sheepman had in mind. But all he could think of was he had forgotten to question Tug about the boots they'd found on Tulare.

His shoulders moved impatiently. "Damn it all, if you've got any—"

Pritchett held a hand up. "Look!"

Gannon turned to where the man was pointing.

On the western flank of Kayler Butte, etched sharp and clear against the sky, a file of horsemen came sweeping toward them. The sun glinted from the rifles across their pommels.

CHAPTER XX

"The Law Has Been Altered!"

PRITCHETT'S bull - throated yell sailed across the moving sheep: "Cuidado, hombres—look out!"

It seemed like every pelado in the burly sheepman's pay knew what he had to do. These men were fighters, and Pritchett's pay and long protection had divorced them of their inhibitions. All across this flat their lunging ponies were converging on the point of impact. No sooner did a horse win free of sheep than its rider left the saddle, to go scurrying with unslung carbine among the scattered rocks.

"Ten hours, eh?" said Pritchett bitterly. "God damn a man that'll pass his word an' then not back it! D'you think I'm goin' to lay down an' watch these sheep driven into the Tonto? I'm goin' to give them what they're lookin' for!"

"They've got it comin'," Gannon nodded. "But it may be I can talk 'em out of it—"

"It may be that you can shout, too!" Pritchet snarled. "But shoutin' won't stop that bunch—nothin' but lead will stop them goddam fools! It's all they understand! They're wantin' blood an' by Gawd they're goin' to get it!"

Gannon knew that Pritchett was right. The Basin outfits were out of hand. Yonder spreading, onrushing fan of horsemen showed reps from practically every cow spread in the country. Staring up at them from here it looked like all the cowmen of all time were on the gallop—more that sixty larruping, rifle-waving brush-poppers were in that charge. The ground thumped to the drum of their beating hoofs.

IT WAS AT once the strength and weakness of these men who tended cattle that their brash, intolerant minds could hold nothing but contempt for opposition; always they had been that way, and it looked like they always would be. They never learned; guns and violence was their way, their ever-ready answer to any argument. They were men who did all things by rote, immutable as the stars that shone upon their campfires; haters of innovation who fought change and progress at every turn. They had been in this place first and intended sharing it with no one. They had fought the Indians and licked them; they had burned and scared out nesters; they had hoisted grim warnings to the plowmen, and those who would not take the hint and leave of their own volition had been packed out feet first or buried beneath their hard-turned furrows. They had come to look upon themselves as invincible—the embattled warlords of the backlands.

And they thought to drive out sheep as they had driven all things before them. Why not? All over Arizona cowmen had been driving out the sheep, confining them to the unwanted lands that were fit for nothing else. They looked for an easy, crushing victory.

But Tulare's invading sheepmen were of a breed not met before. They were peons freed by Pritchett and brought with a sprinkling of Yaqui Indians from Old Mexico. He had done for them what Pancho Villa was

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Nalder triggered quickly in the direction of that movement ahead

THE WILD BUNCH

By Eric Thane

(author of "A Grey Mask Gives Judgment," "Beaver Cowboy," etc.)

Murderin' Yount was an expert bulldogger—but Blue Heels knew bulldoggin' better than any human!

Oh, his lawss went back to the wild bunch!
His lawss went back—

STREAK NALDER'S husky voice caught and silenced. An hour ago he'd sung this song light-heartedly and impersonally, because it held little meaning; but now, in the purple shadows that crept down from the Sweetgrass hills, it became the requiem for a man who had lived, not many minutes before. Under a cairn of rocks which Nalder's spring-steel fingers had built, lay the lead-punctured body of Gaff. And pawing impatiently against his grave was Blue Heels, the horse that had made him a champion bulldogger—his one close and trusting partner.

They'd tried to get Blue Heels, but the marksmanship had been bad. Yount, the murderer was; Yount and his two henchmen, Bull and Black, tin-horns, thieves, and hangers-on at every rodeo in the West. Yount, with a skill remarkable in one so big and clumsy of body, was Gaff's only

formidable rival for bulldogging honors—and a thousand-dollar purse—at the Galta rodeo tomorrow. He'd aimed, in an act characteristic of him, to make certain of his victory, but Blue Heels, who knew the art of bulldogging better than any human, had escaped the badly-aimed bullet which had cut down Gaff.

"Wal, Blue Heels, I reckon you're goin' back to the wild bunch!" whispered Nalder, his tall, thin body tense. "You're Gaff's, an' I promised him if he died I'd turn you out to your wild brothers. An' I aim to—after a while. You an' me's got a job to do, Blue Heels, before you go back to the wild bunch! I reckon Gaff wouldn't sleep plumb restful if you didn't take a crack at Yount an' them killers uh his! I reckon you've got a little evenin' up to do for your dead master!"

Personally, Nalder had nothing against Yount. He hated him as he hated all bullying cowards who worked with their killers at their backs, but he'd encountered no actual harm at the hands of the man. But Gaff had been a friend of his. Nalder's curious eyes, obsidian-black in the sun-burnt red of his face, hardened; his wind-scarred lips grew grim. He looked at Blue Heels. The animal drooped, as if in realization of the fact that its owner was no more.

"Blue Heels, I'm ridin' you tomorrow to beat Yount!" Nalder declared. "I ain't much of a bulldogger; it's up to you to beat Yount—an' even things fer your dead master! An' then it's back to the wild bunch fer you!"

Blue Heels stirred impatiently and whistled. Nadler saw, silhouetted against the clear sky of recent sunset, the forms of a dozen wild horses. He hastened to secure Blue Heels' reins. Then he mounted his own bronc and headed south and west around the hills for Galta. Occasionally he glanced back; what an emptiness there was to that saddle!

Gaff had been an old man, twisted by years of rodeo work, but he'd been good — mainly because of the skill and almost-human instinct of Blue Heels. Nalder was not a show rider, but he had done a little bulldogging. He was going to do more tomorrow! Not if he could help it would Yount capture that thousand-dollar first prize! Nalder sat stiffly erect in the saddle, his body, for all the long, lanky looseness of it, a bundle of pliable steel rods.

A roaming cowpuncher eternally seeking peace beyond the horizon, he and Gaff had hooked up six months before for a tour of the rodeos, Gaff to bulldog, and Nalder to work at whatever might give him employment. They'd worked east and south from Calgary through British Columbia into Montana. And like an evil shadow Yount had followed, never taking first prize but continually threatening. Until today his underhand tricks had not flared into open warfare. But today—

He and Bull and Black had risen from the coulee, to fire together, and tc disappear. They'd been very sure of themselves—but careless. They hadn't got Blue Heels. Slowly, rage surged up thru Nalder. Murderers! But how was he going to prove it—the word of the three of them against his single oath?

But that scarcely mattered—tomorrow Blue Heels would avenge his master. Yount would never secure that first prize—not if Streak Nalder could help it! Gaff had relatives back east, Nalder knew; they could use the thousand dollars quite easily, if they were as poor as Gaff had been.

IT WAS past midnight when the man with the curious, obsidian eyes rode into Galta. Though late, the little city was celebrating hilariously; rodeos didn't come every few days. Out on the prairie the night was black and silent, but here the whoops of drunken men, an occasional shot, the banging of pianos and the gurgle of liquor created a bedlam through which Nalder rode. His eyes were narrowed into wrinkled creases, his Stetson was pulled far down on his forehead with his coat pulled up about his ears, for frost was sparkling in damp places along the road.

He found a feed-yard and barn, where he secured a box-stall for Blue Heels. The animal seemed fretful, impatient; Nalder soothed the sleek sides and nose with the cool touch of his hand and the calming hum of his voice. After an hour he left, carefully padlocking the place. He took no chances. The town was wide open, and Blue Heels was a prize for any horsethief.

He hesitated before the Northern Bar. The bang of the piano, the hum of voices, the clink of glasses, lured him. No harm in a drink before he found a place to sleep. He thrust open the swinging doors and, inside, rested one worn boot against the brass rail. He heard a woman say, "Oh, look at that puncher with the funny black eyes!" But observations of this sort were not new to him. He ordered a drink, downed it slowly, and with the alcohol warming his veins, swung about to face the room.

Then he tensed. His heel, which had been hooked against the rail, banged to the splintered floor.

"Howdy, Nalder!" said Yount. "Never figgered to see you here!"

He leaned against the bar—a big, sloppy man, yellow of tooth, unshaven, stumpy bow legs, with a thick trunk topped off by a bull neck and a bullet head, devoid of hair. As if to compensate for his unsavory person, he was dressed in the foppish height of cowboy fashion. Silver and polished leather—and about his waist a gun that swung low and strapped to his thigh, with whang cords depending from the end of the holster.

"Glad to see yuh lookin' good!" Streak Nalder said. He was cold as ice, calm and unemotional as the rock that resembled his eyes. Outwardly calm. But within—fury like a red wave swept through him, tugging at the cords of self-control which bound it. Nalder's fingers twitched.

"Y' know, Nalder, I've wondered where yuh got thet name uh 'Streak'!" Yount questioned. He lighted a cigarette, his glittering, tiny eyes never leaving Nalder's face. Behind him lounged Bull and Black, twins for slight build and rat-like, unshaven faces, and copies of their master when it came to sartorial splendor.

Nalder took off his hat. His black hair was streaked with white. It was an involuntary gesture; he hadn't meant to remove the Stetson, but for the moment his head was without cover Yount had laughed, "I reckon I see now why they call yuh 'Streak'!"

"Mebby! An' mebby fer other reasons!"

"Meanin'?"

"I'm plumb good with a gun, Yount! Fast!" Nalder heard himself say, his fury for an instant breaking through his self-control. Instantly he regretted the words; he didn't want to antagonize Yount before the ride — he was confronted with a tremendous enough task as it was, without having the worry of Yount's underhandedness confronting him. He saw Gaff's killer tense, with narrowed eyes and lips that weren't pleasant to see.

"NOW, meanin' what with thet, Nalder?"

"Nothin', Yount!" Nalder turned his back to the men and ordered another drink. He downed it quickly and about-faced.

"Gaff was killed today!" he said.

"Yeah?" Yount's face didn't change in the least. "Now, why d'you suppose thet happened? Hawss fall on him?"

"He was murdered! Hombres killed him aimin' t' git his hawss, Blue Heels, but they misjudged the distance!"

"Now, thet's too bad! I'm plumb sorry!"

"Sorry, hell!" Nalder snarled. His right hand dipped, darted under his coat like a striking snake. Then, with the cold grip of his .45 palmed, he experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. He had no call to kill Yount. Yount had never harmed him. His purpose was only to see that Blue Heels got revenge for his dead master. He was not the instrument of revenge, only an accessory.

"Sorry!" he said, not knowing what he was sorry for.

Yount bawled out, "See him? He's goin' fer his gun! Throw 'em,

boys!" He took a rolling step back and dragged up his Colt. Behind him Bull and Black flickered their weapons ready for action. There was a screaming bedlam inside the room, chairs hurled sprawling, men shouting, cursing, the tinkle of a broken light. The yellow lamp-flames swirled in the sudden exodus of bodies through the swinging doors.

The bar-keep ducked down and came up with a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun. He slapped it against the wet table, covering both Nalder and Yount.

"Thet'll be all, gents!" he said grimly. "We run a respectable dump here, an' we don't aim to allow no shootin'! You throw lead in here an' you're all going to get enough shot in your anat'my t' weight yuh down plumb to hell!"

Yount froze. Nalder saw his face, pale beneath the black fur of whiskers. Bull and Black dropped their guns back, and Nalder withdrew his hand.

Yount's hand shook. "Put thet iron back an' get outa here!" persuaded the bar-keep.

"I'll git out, but I'm goin' to git this Streak Nalder, if it's the last thing I do!" declared Gaff's killer, in spite of the chatter of his teeth. And his words weren't mere bravado. Nalder sensed he meant them. The black-eyed man felt ice run up along his spine, a chill creep over him.

Yount would shoot in the dark! He was as snake-in-the-grass as they came.

"Listen, Yount!" Streak said slowly. "You killed my friend today! I reckon his hawss, Blue Heels, if he was human, would be plumb sorry! Wal, I aim t' see thet hawss evens things up fer old Gaff. Sounds funny t' you, don't it: a hawss gettin' revenge against men? Wal, it's true, an' I'm helpin' the hawss!"

"Always thought yuh was nutty; now I'm certain!" Yount snarled.

"I'm ridin' Blue Heels in the bulldoggin', Yount; jest t' beat you out of the prize! After thet, Blue Heels goes back to the wild bunch! An' you'll not be bothered—if you're wise an' don't make me any madder'n I am now!"

"Too much talk, gents!" cut in the bar-keep. "You, with them black eyes: git movin'! I give yuh five minutes head-start over these other three hombres!"

Nalder spun on his heel, thrust himself between the swinging doors and out into the night. Overhead the stars glittered. The Aurora hung jaggedly over the northern horizon, and underfoot the dust of the main street swirled up damply into Nalder's nostrils. He took out his gun and spun the cylinder. His face was as emotionless as granite. He wasn't going to bother Yount; he'd even go out of his way to avoid Gaff's killer. But he would never run—Streak Nalder did that from no man!

HE HEADED for the feed-yard where he'd left Blue Heels and his own bronc. It was with a sense of relief that he let himself into the hay- and horse-scented barn. A lantern burned dimly in one corner; shadows, vast and uncertain, danced over everything. Nalder hesitated. Would Yount hunt him down? Probably not; even if he wanted to, he'd not know where to look, for Nalder had come in long after dark, and unknown. The obsidian-eyed man sat down and reflectively unrolled his blanket roll. He was remembering that pile of rocks back there east of the hills—Gaff's grave!

The keeper of the place thrust his head through the upper part of the two-section door. "All right, mister?" he called. "Yuh sleepin' here?"

"Yeah! I aim t' watch this hawss!"

"Don't blame yuh; there's hombres around this layout ain't to be trusted. Wal, sleep heavy. An' watch out fer thet lantern!"

Nalder smoked a cigarette before he crawled into the blankets. He seemed very high-strung tonight, nervous, tense, and watchful as a cat. No wonder, he thought—twice today he'd looked upon death, once real death in the form of Gaff, the other time potential death in the glitter of Yount's six-gun. His fingers, he

noted, were cold as ice, but not nervous. That pleased him. "Streak" Nalder could still streak if necessary. He eventually dozed off to troubled and nightmare-ridden sleep.

He hadn't blown out the lantern. He awoke with the impression that the keeper of the stable was talking to him. The man hung over the lower section of the door. But not pleasantly. His eyes bulged; his face was a mass of blue veins. Suffocated, Nalder thought, with no realization of what it was all about.

Then he saw Yount. And Nalder snapped with the speed which had given him his name. He understood in a flash the dead barn-keeper. He flipped over, jerked his gun from the holster where it lay alongside him and swung it up. Yount's face leered over him, hard and grim—without mercy! Nalder pressed the trigger. Flame gushed between the two men, blotting out the hairy cheeks of Yount. Nalder recoiled at the thunderous boom of the gun in the confined space within the barn. Instinctively he sensed he'd missed, even before the killer fastened upon his gun arm and wrestled his Colt out of his fingers.

He flattened under the impact of three bodies lunging upon him. In that moment he didn't think; he moved as an animal moves, blindly but with one purpose; to live! He glimpsed Bull; the man's mouth was wide open, gaping with his exertion. Under the impact of Nalder's fist it snapped shut, blood frothing the heavy lips. A curse choked to gurgling silence. Nalder flashed a look at Black, who dove in, low and hard, smothering the breath out of Streak by the violence of his tackle. He brought his head square into the under man's solar plexus; the world seemed to explode around Nalder, and suddenly all his strength left him. He became a putty man in the hands of the three who quickly bound him with strips of whang they snatched from the harness on the wall.

"Wal, thet'll fix yuh!" gritted Bull, wiping his bleeding mouth.

"Yeah!" amended Black. "Y' ought t' let me plug him, Yount!"

"No killin', boys—leastways, not now!" said the leader crisply. "I got a little score t' settle thet sudden death ain't goin' to settle!" He came forward; his fat body, stiffened a little at the waist due to paunch, bent forward almost into Nalder's face. "I reckon you're breath is comin' back, eh, Nalder? Good!"

"Why good?" said Nadler mechanically. Behind Yount the lantern burned, and made of the man a shadow that seemed more than anything else, a vast, black spider. A hungry spider, terrible with some anticipation.

"We been lookin' fer yuh, Nalder, an' when we found yuh thet gent hangin' there over the door tried to interfere! Wal, he ain't interferin' any more!"

Ice jumped along Nalder's spine.

"Nalder, I want Blue Heels! I'm takin' him tonight! I reckon mebby it was an accident old Gaff got plugged, but I want thet first prize an' I aim t' git it! An' I don't care much how! Me an' my pards is takin' the hawss, an' we're takin' you out on the prairie where yuh won't be no bother tomorrow! Or mebby ever! Nalder!" he said with a deadly hiss. "This evenin' down in the Northern I swore I was goin' to git you! Wal, thet goes. I'm leavin' you out where the chances are nobody'll ever find yuh! You'll be plenty sorry you ever balked Yount!"

BULL went forward and with a quick thrust of a bolt twisted the padlock on the stall open. Black led Blue Heels out; he rammed open the barn door violently, because of the dead man who pressed against it, and led the animal out into the night. Nalder didn't try to resist when they picked him up and threw him painfully over the back of a bronc; as long as Blue Heels was a shadow within sight he watched the horse. He didn't think much—there was little to think about. He jarred and jolted, more than once almost going headlong under the belly of his mount, only saving himself by a miracle of equilibrium. The rush of blood to his head indicated uncon-

sciousness, and just when the blackness was speared with red and a dozen thunderstorms seemed to shatter his eardrums, he was jerked feet-first to the ground.

The blackness, except for starstreak and Aurora, was intense; Yount and Bull were dim ghosts in the dark, the only thing real about them was their harsh voices.

"Them cords plenty tight, Bull?"

Bull's hairy fingers swept over Nalder. "Yeh, plenty tight! He'll never get out of 'em!"

"Good! Take your tie an' ram it in his mouth!"

A fist felled Nalder; dazed, he felt his jaws pried open and a sweaty, dusty neckerchief thrust against his tongue.

"Thar, Nalder!" boomed Yount. "You're down in Dead Man's coulee, where nobody ever comes much, 'count uh the rattlers! You'll last mebby two-three days; a week at the most!" There was the creak of saddle leather as Yount mounted his bronc. "Wal, Ill be winnin' thet prize right soon! An' Nalder, remember this: when I aim t' git a man, I git him! Savvy?"

Boom of laughter, harsh laughter, and then silence. Nalder's mind stirred, groped, awoke to action. He breathed with difficulty. For an instant he tensed his wire-steel muscles, but against the strips of rawhide they were useless. He lay very still, then, for almost an hour. The east began to pale to day—ghost day. The last Nalder would ever see? He didn't know. The thought was none too pleasant.

Not that he feared death, even in its present horrible form; he and death had ridden partners for many years. But he must not die until Blue Heels went back to the wild bunch!

The stars dimmed, and faint light crept through the coulee. Nalder saw cottonwoods, like white, silvery ghosts, their branches damp with dew—from what? Nalder, with an effort that brought sweat all over him, rolled to his side. He glimpsed water—a shallow pool of it, from which mist was rising into the cold dawn. His heart leaped with renewed hope.

One chance! Fraction of an inch by fraction of an inch he edged forward to that puddle, the whang thongs cutting into his flesh with all the keenness of knives. He felt blood over him, over his arms, his legs. The gag in his mouth was saliva soaked, and a loathsome thing that at times brought his stomach upon the verge of emptying itself. Dawn came, and verged upon day. And then Streak Nalder rolled into the water and lay there, utterly exhausted.

For how long he didn't know. But the sun in a red blaze was shifting above the skyline, and hot upon his exposed cheeks, when he made his first attempt to loosen the rawhide which by now had soaked up a great deal of water. He tensed his shoulders; he heaved; sweat stood out on him, ran from him, but his nerveless wrists slipped from the whang loops —free!

He tore the gag from his mouth. It took him a long time; he seemed to have no power at all in his fingers, but by degrees the strength that was his came back and he stretched the thongs that bound his ankles, to stand up—free!

He looked around. Dead Man's coulee! Lucky they hadn't known of the water here; either that, or they hadn't been aware of the propensity of whang to give when moist. Or they might have thought that he wouldn't live long enough to find out—

IT WAS noon when Streak Nalder walked into Galta. Today there was nothing in him but grim determination. He skulked down back ways until he came to the feed-yard where the night before he'd stabled Blue Heels. The dead man was gone. Nalder kicked around among the bales of hay and the mounds of loose alfalfa until he found the thing he sought—his gun. His eyes were harder, now, than the rock they resembled. The purpose behind him had transformed them into something more than rock. He rubbed his wrists where red welts were still vis-

ible. Then he went out into the street, down to the rodeo grounds.

A dozen long barns here stabled the horses. Nalder settled into concealment and waited—for hours. The grandstand filled, rumbled, roared; horses screamed, men shouted, cattle bellowed. Then, with the bucking over for this day, the bull-dogging event was prepared for.

Nalder glimpsed steers being driven into the release chutes; he saw punchers preparing their mounts for the event. And then Bull came riding by on Blue Heels.

Nalder snapped like a steel spring. One swift step forward he took, to grasp the animal's reins. Bull almost went over the saddle horn at the abruptness of the stop.

"Why, you—" He saw then who it was, paling until his cheeks, under the grime and growth, were like paper.

"Yeah, it's me!" said Nalder, in his low voice. "I'm ridin' Blue Heels fer first prize. I ain't done much bulldoggin', but Blue Heels knows critters better than any man, an' I reckon I can beat Yount! Go back to Yount an' tell him he'll have to ride his own hawss, an' like hell, if he reckons to beat Blue Heels!"

Nalder saw Bull snap upright. His lips curled in a snarl, animal-like, with a fury that was more than animal! His hand dropped to his hip, then flashed up.

Nalder didn't take his left palm from the reins. His hand seemed scarcely to move, yet it traveled a long distance with the speed of light. His gun boomed a fraction ahead of Bull's. He waited tensely, wondering if a second shot might be necessary.

It wasn't. Bull shuddered; he swayed and caught at the horn; his fingers slipped nervelessly across the polished ball, and the man flopped down into the dust under Blue Heels' belly.

"An' thet's one fer Gaff!" Nalder said, conscious of the sweat on his face. "Reckon Gaff'll be a little easier now! Blue Heels, you'll even things fer your dead master yet. Now help me beat Yount bulldoggin'!"

At the gate leading into the enclosure before the grandstand, Nalder was halted by an attendant, who demanded his name. "Streak Nalder! My entry fee was paid by a hombre named Gaff!" he said. With Blue Heels prancing, he rode forward. He was conscious that a thousand pairs of eyes watched him, friendly eyes, most of them; wondering who this tall, thin, obsidian-eyed stranger with the streaked hair was, but wishing him well. Nalder backed into the fence and stripped himself of his gun. Then, his steel body stiff with determination, he waited.

A gun cracked; a steer catapulted from the release chute and bored off across the dusty arena at a dead run. A cowboy rode alongside; he hurled himself from the saddle, grasped the animal's horns, twisted, and the two of them went down in a welter of dust and sound from which emerged the puncher, to throw up his hand in exultation. The timer's whistle shrilled.

"Good work!" applauded Nalder, momentarily forgetful of self. The next bulldogger wasn't so fortunate; he failed to rise to his feet and when the pick-up men drove the steer away he lay very still, with blood all over his chest. A horn had rammed him just below the floating ribs. He'd probably die, Nalder thought, and shook to a new thought: an experienced bulldogger had slipped; what chance had he, Nalder, who knew little of the art?

The announcer, red-faced and sweating due to the beaded Indian-work vest that tightly encased his shoulders, boomed, "Yount, from Alberta, comin' up!" Nalder felt a chill sweep over him. His eyes narrowed. The man waddled almost past him, but apparently without consciousness of his proximity. His lightness was surprising; he forked his bronc like a *vaquero*, and bulldogged his steer with speed and ease that, by comparison, rendered the attempts of his rivals almost clumsy and uncertain.

THE timer announced his recording, and Nalder's heart dropped like lead. Almost a world's record,

Nalder knew. Surely he couldn't beat those seconds! His jaw clamped. He patted Blue Heels on the mane.

"It's up to you, hawss!" he whispered.

Yount, an oily smile of triumph on his face, rolled back to the chutes. His yellowed teeth shone between dust-caked lips. He was laughing, like he'd laughed last night, gloating, triumphant this time over the dead Gaff!

The laughter froze when he saw Nalder. He spat out. "You! I couldn't figger why Bull didn't bring up thet hawss when I was ready! Wal, I don't need the nag now; I've won anyway!"

"So you think!" Nalder commented simply.

"Whar's Bull?"

"Back there—in the dust!" He saw Yount's face whiten. But the man laughed and rolled on; jarring laughter, Nalder thought—choked with the prescience of evil, and threatening! If Nalder won, his life would not be worth a penny. Perhaps it wasn't anyway—Yount's laugh, and actions last night, announced the bulldogger's intentions of murder as long as Streak Nalder remained alive.

"Streak Nalder, comin' up!" bawled the announcer.

Nalder tightened. There would be no trials for him, no preliminary—at his first attempt he must make his record. He shortened rein, gathered himself. Under the saddle he felt Blue Heels crouch for a leap. Nalder raised his hand to wipe the sweat which persisted in getting into his eyes, but before the action was completed the gun popped and a wild-eyed steer burst from the chute.

Nalder didn't have time to think, except to marvel at the way Blue Heels flew and crowded into the running animal, almost halting it. There was no need for distance gauging, or steadying, or maneuvering—Nalder simply spilled himself upon the steer and twisted the animal by the force of his fall.

He'd beaten Yount's record by a full three seconds.

He didn't try to better it. He rode slowly back to the fence, and put on his gun. He seemed to know instinctively that he'd won first prize; that Yount, try as he might, could never lower the record. He watched Gaff's killer use up his chances in a vain attempt to better his own first record.

"Streak Nalder, first prize—" bellowed the announcer. Nalder took a bow and rode out of the arena. The dust was thick upon his face; his lips pained him, due to the alkali bite. Very slowly he went the length of the main street. The roar of the crowd dimmed, vanished, and Nalder found himself upon the prairie with the city a quarter of a mile behind.

He felt Blue Heels quiver nervously, and looking up he saw, silhouetted against the skyline, a dozen wild horses. They were alert, excited, facing forward with upflung ears and waving tails. The wild bunch!

Nalder said, in a low voice, "Wal, Blue Heels, Gaff took you outa the wild bunch an' made yuh his pal, an' I promised to send yuh back if anythin' ever happened to him! Yuh plumb avenged him today by not lettin' Yount into thet prize money! I reckon I'll be sendin' yuh back to the wild bunch!"

He dismounted. His gun flopped against his thigh, and brought to him the unpleasant reality of death. Either he or two men must die before he left Galta tonight. He heard himself laugh. Let Yount and Black come; they'd do the first shooting! Perhaps also the last. But he hoped not. He flexed his fingers, experimentally drew his gun a couple of times. He'd been plenty fast this afternoon when Bull had attacked him. He must be just as fast when Yount and Black jumped him!

He was suddenly aware of a chill in the air, and it surprised him that evening had come; the white flare of the sun was slipping down over the jagged horizon of the Rockies. He shivered. The quick change of superheated afternoon atmosphere to icy dusk caught at his throat and set him to coughing. He was almost doubled. When he straightened up he saw two horsemen approaching.

He didn't need a closer view to identify Yount and Black. They

rode purposefully, grimly, the tense watchfulness of their manner apparent even at the distance. Manifestly they'd watched Nalder leave town. They had followed. Like wolves, Nalder thought; wolves that had finally tracked down their prey and with the advantage of greater numbers were creeping in.

HE DROPPED Blue Heels' reins and took a dozen swift steps to one side. Then it occurred to him that there was a possibility of the horse falling into enemy hands. That meant he might die. He retraced his path and with swift, sure fingers stripped the bridle from the animal. He threw it to the ground, and upon it piled the saddle and blanket.

"Git movin', Blue Heels! Back to the wild bunch!" Nalder said softly, slapping the animal upon the rump. Gaff's horse hesitated a moment, then with upflung ears indicating the wild bunch there on the skyline, he broke into a gallop that carried him from sight into the swiftly-densing dusk.

Nalder felt suddenly lonely. He watched Blue Heels as long as he was visible; then he turned to face Yount and Black. They rode ahead, warily, evidently expecting a bullet, and when none came they were emboldened to the point of dismounting. They swaggered forward, ready; Yount in the lead with Black a little behind and to the left of him. They were poised, tense, but very sure. Black's hand was upon the butt of his gun. He could draw and kill before Nalder was able to lift his Colt from the holster—or so he thought!

"Howdy, boys!" Nalder greeted. He stood with feet partly spread, balanced upon the soles of his boots. His hands were even with his chest. His long, steel fingers played with the neckerchief around his throat, with the knot, lightly, ready to drop at the flicker of coming death.

"Wal, Nalder, we followed yuh!" snarled Yount. He halted. He lighted a cigar, and chewed it fiercely. Nalder could see that he was enjoying himself thoroughly. He was safe in the knowledge of his power. He hadn't seen the killing of Bull that afternoon!

"Looks that way, Yount! Got business with me?"

"Damn it, yuh know my business! What'd you go'n let thet hawss loose fer?"

"When yuh killed Gaff I promised myself thet Blue Heels'd be the means of the dead Gaff gettin' revenge. Wal, he got it, all right! I don't know much about bulldoggin', but this afternoon I beat yuh! That was because Blue Heels was up to every trick uh doggin'!"

"Yuh got a thousand dollars. Mebby I'll git thet now!" suggested Yount.

"I ain't collected it yet, but they know where to send it. Yount, once I promised Gaff I'd send thet hawss back to the wild bunch if he ever went on! Wal, I've done it!"

"You're a fool, Nalder!" declared Yount stridently, "You're a fool to buck me! Why didn't yuh have sense enough to leave me alone?"

"Because I stick to my friends!" said Nalder swiftly. He saw that Yount, with every ounce of his colossal cruelty aroused, was playing him like a cat might torment a mouse. Presently he'd decide to kill. Nalder was stiff, no emotion, no quiver of set muscles—waiting!

"Wal, thet's your tough luck, Nalder! Last night, some fool way er another, yuh broke outa Dead Man's coulee, but you ain't goin' to be so plumb lucky now! Black!" he snarled, "Feed him lead!"

NOW! Nalder's right hand dropped with lightning speed, smacked with audible sound against the butt of his gun, and came up. Black's Colt boomed just once. Nalder felt lead whistle past him; smelt the hot scent of it—so close! Then he jammed against the trigger of his own weapon.

Black's mouth was open in the effort of his concentration. Now it snapped shut. The look of surprise on his face was ludicrous. Fingers suddenly nerveless dropped his gun; he took one halting step, then crashed forward into the dust at Yount's feet.

"Keep your hand tight against your gun in that holster, Yount!" Nalder warned, "I don't enjoy killin'! An' if yuh draw I'll have to kill yuh!"

"You—you—who are you?" whispered Yount.

"Me? Streak Nalder, you know thet! Surprised I got Black so fast? Wal, I told yuh once how I happen to carry thet name, 'Streak'!"

"You're not carryin' it long!" Yount snapped. In the emergency he acted blindly, and with the speed of desperation. He was so fast that his gun was out and flaming before Nalder could press the trigger of his own weapon. He felt a red-hot thrust through his shoulder; he reeled, but in the split fraction of a second recoiled to solidity. His gun crashed—three times, the triple boom-boom drowning Yount's second bullet. Gaff's killer staggered. He coughed. Upon his face was a terrible look of baffled fury.

"Nalder, you—you."

His gun dropped. He went forward to his knees, still alive, but unconscious. He hung to life for a long time, until he was flat in the dust. There he quivered for an instant before he stilled.

Nalder dropped his weapon back into its holster. He was suddenly sick—and not from the bullet in his shoulder. His mouth was bitter. Too much killing, he thought. He wavered towards Yount's bronc, and crawled into the saddle. Blood made his side unpleasantly sticky.

He'd given Yount and his men every chance, he reflected. He twisted to look back—to look at those two still figures—and farther up, against the horizon, the wild horses.

He heard himself break into uncertain song:

Oh, his hawss went back to the wild bunch—
His hawss went back to the wild bunch—

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Western Action, published 5 times a year at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1943.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Western Action and that the following is, to to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation) etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Managing Editor, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 60 Hudson St., New York City.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 60 Hudson St., New York City; Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Maurice Coyne, 60 Hudson St., New York City; Harold Hammond, 60 Hudson St., New York City.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only).

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1943. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [SEAL]

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Fact Articles of The West

FOR many years the quiet, slow-speaking man had been a member of the sports department of a big New York daily. Then, on October 25, 1921, they found him slumped over his desk, dead. Quickly the word spread across the United States, ran across the West like a licking prairie fire. Bat Masterson, the old time lawman, was dead.

"Who's Bat Masterson?" asked a wide-eyed cub reporter.

Older newspapermen did not answer him. There was no use in wasting words on a dumb kid. Newspaper reporters wrote thrilling obituaries recalling Bat Masterson's prowess with a sixshooter. But none of their writing was as thrilling as had been the life of the old marshal.

There was that time in Dodge City when Ed Masterson, Bat's younger brother, had been shot down by Alfred Walker and Jack Wagner, gun-toting badmen. Word reached Bat about his brother's untimely murder. Bat Masterson tugged his guns around and walked into the saloon. His brother lay dead on the floor.

"You two men are under arrest," he told Walker and Wagner.

COLD NERVES—HOT TRIGGERS! ★★

★ ★ ★ By Lee Thomas ★ ★ ★

"What fer?" demanded Walker.

"Murder." Bat Masterson spoke softly. "You comin' peaceful?"

Walker and Wagner went for their guns. Guns roared and bucked: powdersmoke lifted to the rafters. Men scurried for shelter behind the bar, behind the chairs, behind the tables. Then the gun-roar ceased.

Bat Masterson stood there, his legs spread wide. There was a tight smile on his handsome face; there was sorrow in his heart. He hated to have to kill, but he had had to kill again; both Walker and Wagner were dead.

Ben Thompson, the Texas killer, went into Springers theatre one night, and while there he threatened a comedian. The man, probably terribly frightened, did not do as Thompson ordered. Thompson cocked his guns.

Bat Masterson had heard about the disturbance. He broke back-stage and snapped, "That's enough of that, Ben!"

Ben Thompson whirled. He was a Killer—he had a score of deaths behind him—yet he halted when he saw Bat Masterson's drawn guns. He was half drunk and his rage was aroused. For some time he stood there, cynical and hard, studying Bat Masterson. Then his better judgment overcame the whiskey he had drunk.

"You win, Bat," he said, holstering his guns. "Let's take a drink on it." They went out arm-in-arm, joking.

ALTHOUGH a lawman, Bat Masterson had many friends among that ill-sized fraternity that rode the Owlhoot Trail. But, whenever any of them overstepped the law in Dodge, or any other town wherein Bat was the law, they either went to jail; if they chose to fight it out, they usually went to the hospital. For Bat Masterson, although he was a lawman, was no killer. He would much rather wound a man than kill him, and he was a deadly shot.

At seventeen, he was hunting buffalo. At twenty, his guns on his thighs, he was taking the law into Dodge City. He was fearless but he was not inhuman. He valued a man's friendship highly.

Teddy Roosevelt appointed Bat Masterson as United States marshal for Oklahoma; Bat Masterson declined the position. He explained his stand to the fighting president. He had a rep as a gunman. Oklahoma was full of would-be killers. One of them, to gain a rep, would set out to kill him. Then he would be forced to kill the gunman, and Bat Masterson did not want to kill anybody that foolish.

His nerves were made of steel. A gambler had killed a man in a fair fight in Fort Worth. Friends of the dead man gathered and started talk that they would lynch the gambler. Bat Masterson shoved the gambler into jail for safety, then he crouched outside that night, his guns loose in leather.

Dark, silent, he hunkered there, a shadow under the Texas moon. Men walked the street, saw him, became silent. Bat Masterson, they said, was on the job. Even now he squatted beside his jail, and knew what was brewing. Needless to say, there was no lynching in Fort Worth that night.

He went through the terrible fight at Adobe Walls. Here a band of Kiowa Indians attacked some thirty whites. They struck at daybreak and there were hundreds of the redskins. The whites were penned inside an adobe store. All day long the fight waged, but finally the Indians were driven off. They turned into Texas and raided there, going from there to New Mexico.

Bat Masterson, hardly more than a stripling, went through the fight unscathed. His heroism, according to the survivors, was very great. There was no task too menial for his hands. He bathed, washed and bandaged the wounded. His heavy Sharps rifle took its toll of the marauders. He was, in his quiet, unassuming way, the hero of Adobe Walls.

FROM there, he went to Dodge City. That cattle metropolis was at its bloody and violent apex. First he was marshal, then deputy sheriff. He was elected sheriff before he was twenty-one.

Texas cowboys and Texas cattlemen raised hell in Dodge. The growth of Boothill cemetery rivaled the growth of the town. Bat Masterson put a stop to that. He made the cowboys check their guns at hotels and saloons. Those who did not comply with his orders were either personally accosted or made to obey by the new kid sheriff. Those hardy souls who did not obey usual-

ly went around town the next day with their heads wrapped in bandages, grim testimony of the pistol-whipping administered by the newly-elected lawman. Boothill ceased growing, and the population of Dodge leaped amazingly.

For Bat Masterson never killed a man unless he had to. Some historians say he never killed, at the most, more than five men.

He was, at this time, a thin youth of medium-height, with dark hair, and dark mustache; and he always dressed meticulously. He was, at all times, a gentleman. He seldom swore and he drank only enough to be sociable. But, on the other hand, he was no Pollyanna, he was ready for a rough-and-tumble, a gunfight—or any other form of fight forced upon him.

A gang robbed a train in Kansas. A snow storm swirled across the Kansas prairie, and the posse became lost in the storm. Bat Masterson cut across country alone. His hunch worked out correctly; the bandits were heading for an old shack in the hills. When they entered the shack, Bat Masterson was already there waiting for them.

"Don't pull your guns!" warned Bat.

The outlaws, seasoned men, many of them killers, raised their hands, not wanting any part of this slim lawman. He herded the bunch back to town and to jail.

Bat Masterson also had a brush with Clay Allison, the New Mexico gunman. He heard that Bat Masterson was the lawman in Dodge City. Accordingly he came to town to pick a fight with Masterson.

Allison was a rough man, full of braggadocio. He had killed a few men but, at heart, he was more or less a blusterer. Bat Masterson knew this. Allison's cowboys rode with him; they were a hard-cased, gun-slinging lot.

"They're out to get you, Bat," said a deputy.

"Maybeso," said Bat Masterson.

The deputy was mad. "We oughta organize the boys an' go out an' trim the dewlaps off'n these wild hombres. Say the word, Bat, an' I'll gather a posse. How about it?"

BAT MASTERSON shook his head. "You know what would happen? Some of us would get killed, and some of them would get killed. No, not that, fellow. Let Clay Allison an' his men have their fun. They'll ride out of Dodge soon. Better to do that than have a lot of dead men to bury tomorrow."

Clay Allison came, he saw, and, to all intents, he conquered. But his victory held a hollow note. Word got around that Bat Masterson did not want to fight him because he and his men were drunk. That made Clay Allison feel sort of cheap. He never thought of sticking around until he sobered up. He and his riders headed out of Dodge that same day.

One of Bat Masterson's faults lay in the fact that he was too loyal to his friends, and sometimes his friends were anything but law-abiding men. Ben Thompson's brother, Bill, was wounded in a town, and the mob was rising up against him. Ben, because of his reputation, did not dare ride in to help his brother. He appealed to Bat Masterson.

"You go help Billy for me, Bat?"

"All right," agreed Masterson.

Bat went into Ogallala, Nebraska, where Billy Thompson was in bed. He had some friends in town. He had them start to shoot up a saloon. The whole town came on the run for the saloon, wondering what was going on. While they were in the bar Bat Masterson found Billy Thompson, toted him to the railroad track, and shoved him into a boxcar going west.

He took him to a ranch, hid him there, then rode back to Ben Thompson. He told Ben what had happened. Ben, the hardened outlaw, was very glad. He told Bat he was going south into Texas. Bat told him he would get killed there. Ben Thompson laughed.

"They can't kill me," he said.

A few months later, though, Thompson was killed in a saloon, and Bat Masterson realized then that he,

too, would probably die from a bullet.

He hung up his guns and went to New York city. There he went to work on a newspaper. A quiet, sincere man, he worked hard, said little, made many friends in his reserved manner. Many of his contemporaries, working at nearby desks, did not know he had been a famous gunman.

And Bat Masterson never told them.

THE END

"BREYFOGLING" IN THE FUNERAL MOUNTAINS

By Ranger Z. Robin

WAS Jacob Breyfogle too insane to know what he was talking about? If that's true, where did he get the chunks of gold tied in his red bandana?

Jacob Breyfogle claimed he found a gold cliff with nuggets lying all around.

After reaching Austin, Nevada, and getting together a searching party, he could not find the mine again. Ever since it has been one of the mysteries of Death Valley, and prospecters, miners, and scientists, have all this time kept up "Breyfogling" in the Funeral Mountains.

In 1862 Jacob started out from Los Angeles, with two companions, for the Reese River District in Nevada.

They traveled for several days, crossing the Mohave, and Panamint Valley.

One night when they made camp at a water hole in the Panamint Mountains, Breyfogle slept a few yards down the slope from the others.

In the middle of the night, he was awakened by terrible screams. Indians were murdering his companions!

Breyfogle grabbed his shoes, which he had taken off, and in the dark, stumbled over the rocks down the Panamint Mountains, feeling no pain, as he was too crazed with terror.

He hid for some time, then, crossing Death Valley, he finally reached a brackish water hole near the foot of the Funeral Mountains. He was starving and his mouth was swollen from lack of water. His feet were torn and bleeding.

He drank some of the brackish water, which was so salty it made him more crazed of thirst.

At some distance up the mountain, he saw a greenish spot. He staggered toward it, all but exhausted. Water must be there!

He hadn't gone far when he found the ground covered with gold nuggets and a gold cliff facing him a little higher up.

The man was so nearly dead, he didn't waste much time, but gathered up some of the nuggets and tied them in his handkerchief, then continued on toward the green patch in the distance.

What he found was not water, but a mesquite tree. He ate ravenously of the beans, and then went insane from thirst.

He evidently did not know that the Indians claim by digging deep about a mesquite tree water can be found.

BREYFOGLE wandered for days, his mind a blank. He must have come across water somewhere in order to remain alive, for in due time he reached Baxter Springs, where he obtained fresh water! He drank and rested and drank some more! Soon, his senses returned. He

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was then across the Funerals and past the Amargosa Desert!

He continued into Smoky Valley, where a man by the name of Wilson took care of him. He was almost helpless, starving and his clothes torn in shreds. Wilson fed and clothed him.

Later Breyfogle told Wilson where he found the gold tied in the bandana Wilson had found in his shoe. Why he had carried his shoes all this time is a mystery.

Wilson took Freyfogle to Austin, Nevada, where a man named Gooding joined them in getting men and supplies to return and locate the gold mine.

Breyfogle found the mesquite tree. He found the brackish water hole, but neither he nor his searchers could find the cliff of gold.

The searching party became disgusted, decided he was insane, and returned to Austin.

From then on, Breyfogle at different times, interested many searching parties, but the gold mine could never be found.

So, like lots of other folks, Breyfogle spent his whole life looking for riches—something he never found—thereby missing a lot of happiness he might have gotten out of life if he had put his mind on some of the simpler pleasures of everyday living.

In 1900, Tonopah, Nevada was discovered. In 1903, Goldfield was discovered. In 1904 the Bullfrog, or Rhyolite, near Beatty, Nevada, was discovered.

Several thousand searchers poured into these districts and plenty of gold was found.

Then the National Bank Mine, near the Bullfrog, was discovered.

Breyfogle, while living, always insisted he would find his mine again, but he never did.

Did others find it when they discovered the National Bank Mine, as some claim?

Is this mine no other than the Lost Breyfogle? Is it true? Or was the mystery of Death Valley covered by a landslide? Or is it yet to be rediscovered?

THE END

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W. A.

(Continued From Page 71)

to do for others of their kind a few years hence; given them good food and guns and horses. They would do what Pritchett told them and could lick their weight in wildcats, and were eagerly looking forward for a chance to demonstrate their worth.

Gannon had seen Yaquis fight before and had some notion of what these Basin boys had picked on. He didn't like it, but they were in the right and he would back them to the limit—governor or no damned governor! These cowmen should be taught they didn't own the country.

Jerking forth his rifle, he followed Pritchett.

FORTY CHARGING yards away the cowmen opened up. A withering blast of lead screamed past, spanging off of boulders, reducing brush to broken twigs and filling the air with fury. Rolling across the flat, the rumbling echoes of that gunfire smashed against flanks of Kayler Butte like the clattering fall of tenpins. The sheep sheered off in crazed stampede, but the line of cursing herders strung along the Tonto's rim succeeded in turning them, and they went pelting after the vanguard, sweeping straight on down the Basin. And after them, cresting the rise that swelled from Gun Creek's bank, came a tossing sea of horns; the bawling of stampeding cattle.

Gannon grabbed the sheepman's shoulder, whirling him round to look. Pritchett's grin was wicked reassurance. "My breeds," he said, "have got a cure for that. No goddam cattle are goin' to ram among those sheep! Get down behind this rock an' watch a minute!"

Gannon watched, and suddenly saw those bawling, fear-crazed longhorns stop. It was as though a wire'd been stretched across the flat; it seemed miraculous the way that mad, onrushing horde abruptly stopped. Hardly had the steers appeared than something seemed to wedge them there. Cattle behind came rushing up, caroming into those motionless ones in front; goring them, trampling them, shoved on by more behind—hurtling forward to be checked in turn themselves. Their piteous bawling rose above the smash and crack of rifles. A few steers floundered to their feet and limped away; a few—but precious few. The blood stampede was broken almost before it got under way.

Gannon turned to Pritchett with a baffled, wondering glance.

Pritchett's tough grin fired his face. "Been expectin' that," he said; "I've fought cattlemen before an' know their tactics. I had the boys widen a gully back there an' fill it up with brush and barbed wire. First thing this mornin'. Worked pretty well, don't you reckon?"

Gannon looked again and swore. He swung back furiously to find Pritchett gone.

TEMPER tore at him wickedly. Thought of all those slaughtered cattle made the blood inside him boil. But there was nothing he could do about it. Those steers were dead or dying. After all, he'd repeatedly warned these Basin outfits to leave the sheep alone; with their usual stubborn, bull-headed love of violence they had brought this on themselves.

He shoved fresh cartridges into the magazine of his rifle, tugged his hat down low, and crouching, sprinted forward into the wavering line of battle. Ricocheting lead smashed off the rocks about him; shouts, cries and curses interspersed the slowing bang of carbines. Riderless horses went tearing across the flat. And here and there a horse lay threshing; squealing in its final agony.

Sporadic firing marked the battle now. In these Yaqui fighters the cowmen had found a violence equal to their own; a scorn of danger even greater—an animal ferocity nowhere else encountered. Such cowmen as still were mounted were making no bones of the matter, but were spurring their ponies off along obscure paths to safety. Off yonder there went Tug and Burac and a puncher Gannon recognized. The Basin outfits seemed to have no stomach for this kind of slaughter. They'd met at last an enemy who did not run.

Red and grim the sun was setting.

A good round dozen of the cow crowd lay among those mile-long shadows stretched across the flat with here and there a big hat marking the body of some sheepman.

Not all of those prone figures, though, were lifeless. Hot blood still coursed. Hate burned high. More than one brash finger still curled tight about its trigger, crashing rifle sound against the cliffs of Kayler Butte.

Back there a bit Gannon had found Calhoun, the Turkey Track man, with three holes through his body. And just now had stumbled across the Jordan range boss. Big Autwine would ride no more.

It was over, and a mighty weariness was clawing at Gannon's muscles; all his limbs felt stiff as lead. His mouth was like a wad of cotton and the ringing in his ears was like a constant high-wave sound.

A husky, hailing voice bit through the numbness of his mind. He'd thought the last thumped ounce of his vitality was drained out of him But he'd been wrong. That calling voice bit through the chaos of his thoughts. Jangling nerves slammed him round to face the sound.

A man propped on an elbow ten yards distant wagged a feeble, beckoning hand and he went over. "Not goin' to bite you," grunted the fellow, and Gannon bent down, slipped a supporting arm beneath the burly, prostrate shoulders. Then recognition of the owner of this powder-blackened face came to him with a sense of shock.

"Rago!"

An obscure smile thinned Rago's lips. His voice was only a whisper now. "Yeah. Same Rago — always grabbin' the short end of the goddam stick. Why'n't you laugh?—I'm endin' where you said I would."

"Rago," Gannon said. "I'm sorry about this thing."

"For me? You needn't be. I took my chance an'—I'm not kickin'. I ain't afraid t' die."

Gannon stared at him. "No," he said, "I guess you're not. Tell me:

(Continued On Page 90)

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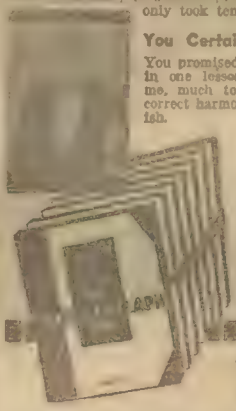

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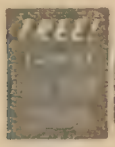

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(Continued From Page 89)

Did you bring young Jordan into this?"

Humor touched the cowman's eyes very briefly. "The little rat brought me in—said he wasn't fretted of me any more—I could use my hold f' smoke papers—that I'd back him in this crazy raid or I'd not marry into Box O D. You—"

His voice choked off. A shudder shook him, and when it passed he lay against Gannon's shoulder. There was red upon his lips. Gannon raked a hard glance round; sent it bitterly to the creek. Too far. No chance to get him water now.

He said: "Where's Dixie Duncan gone?"

"Home," grunted Rago, grimacing. "Damn' nuisance. Tol' 'er I seen Tenney—said I'd tol' the kid she was here an' girl wouldn't have a thing to do with 'er. I hadda get her outa the place—I tol' her Tenney was bitter as hell—'f she went down there girl would leave."

Gannon marveled at the heartless cruelty of the mind that could concoct such a lie and tell it.

"Where are those I. O. U.'s Tug Jordan gave you?"

"That's—tha's laugh! You fool," muttered Rago weakly, "....ain't no Jordan....goddam tribe—a Jennings ....Texas—" Rago's feverish moving lips mumbled something unintelligible. Then: "Ol' man 'dop—"

Gannon lowered the now limp shoulders to the ground. Somebody'd be sending a wagon out pretty soon. In half an hour it would be dark.

He whirled at the crunch of a bootstep back of him.

It was Pritchett. Pritchett said: "Rago, eh?" and stood looking down at the man reflectively. "Well, that's another fool beef-eater that won't be troublin' any more cooks for coffee."

He looked at Gannon curiously. "Ain't sick, are you, bucko? Seems like you're a mite peaked around the gills—"

"I'm thinkin' about those cattle!"

A grin broke its mark across Pritchett's dusty lips. "Those cattle.... yeah. I don't look for no more trouble gettin' the sheep across this

Basin. This shoot-out washes that ten-hour deadline off the slate."

"It washes off more than that—it washes the law plumb off your side. From here on out you can count on me pluggin' the first guy caught with a gun in his fist. Take your sheep an' get 'em out of the Basin."

Pritchett stared. "Like that, eh? Gonna be tough, are you, bucko? Lemme tell you somethin', Mister. The law says sheep's got as much right to public domain as cattle—"

"The law," Gannon said, "has been altered."

Eye to eye, they stared across three heated feet of distance. The sheepman's copper cheeks brewed heightened color. Gannon, with a look like wind-whipped ice, began: "You heard me—" and stopped suddenly as a thought flipped over in his mind. He stared at the sheepman oddly; said, "Get your sheep outa here by mornin'," and started sprinting for his horse.

CHAPTER XXI

One Small Thing

THOUGH Gannon, following the general direction taken by the retreating cowmen, was heading for the Box O D, his thoughts were on the complicated pattern being woven by the Hackberry killer. Desperately he was trying to guess where the man would be striking next. For in his mind a vague, nebulous form was taking shape, and he was recalling things forgotten in the rush of transpiring events. That business of the heelmark on the porch; the mysterious something King Jordan had gone back for; Burac's enmity of Jordan; the switched boots and Tennessee's stained handkerchief. Tennessee—the thought of her had faded, like her image, to a dim, dull ache at the back of Gannon's mind.

His arrival at the Box O D was carefully observed by the five or six disgruntled punchers lounging before the bunkhouse. They watched him sullenly, their talk suspended; hostile scowls upon their faces.

(Continued On Page 92)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 91)

He brought the gelding to a stop before them; sat regarding them with one knee carelessly hooked about the horn while he rolled himself a smoke. "I guess you birds are feelin' downright proud of yourselves."

The cook grinned sheepishly. Two-three others did a bit of smothered muttering. But no one ventured any open remarks; perhaps recalling what had happened from that cause to Pronto Autwine.

Gannon raked a smouldering glance across them.

"This," he told them finally, "is the last warning. There'll be no more fighting in this Basin—nor anything to start it. Next squirt caught with a gun in hand is goin' to rate himself a shutter."

Turning in the saddle, he kneed his horse to action and started toward the ranch house. Halfway there, however, he remembered something. He swung a look across his shoulder; shoved a signal at the cook.

The cook came trotting over without pleasure.

"You got a button on your lip?"

"Nobody," the man said dourly, "ever hired me fer a windmill."

"Any reason why you shouldn't take a ride?"

"Expect I can still make out t' keep on a hoss's back—I ain't got that stove up."

"This is sheriff business," Gannon said and, taking a bit of paper from his pocket, scrawled a few words hurriedly and passed it to the man.

"Hmm," the cook remarked, squinching up his eyes.

"Can you read?"

"'Course I c'n read!" snapped the cook belligerently. "You wantin' me to take this thing there personal?"

Gannon peeled the top layer from a roll of bills and passed it down; the rest he put back in his pocket. "That's in case of emergency. Take that note to the ranger station at Tonto Basin. Whoever's in charge will wire it in. Wait for an answer, an' when you get it don't spare horseflesh. On your way, now. Don't get drunk, an' keep away from women."

He left the cook staring blankly.

GANNON took his hat off when Tennessee came to the door. She made no pretense at opening it, but eyed him coldly through the screen. "Yes?"

Somehow, facing her like that and seeing the stiff, uncompromising angle of her shoulders, the pat, glib speech he'd fancied himself delivering fled his mind. He stared at her a moment while his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth. He said, "Tug here?" gruffly.

"I don't know where Tug is."

"Haven't you any idea? There's one or two things I'd like to talk to him about."

"You're thinking about that raid, I guess." She gave him a calculating look. Her expression softened somewhat in the earnestness of her words. "You must realize that Tug's just a spoiled boy that's had too much money for his own good. And a deal too much of his own way. He's headstrong, quick-tempered, high-strung. The hate of sheep is in his blood, and Dad's own ideas haven't helped any. The sight of sheep to him is just like waving a red rag in front of a bull." A pleading light got into her eyes. "I suppose he did plan that raid, but —but you ought to make a little allowance for him. After all, he's hardly responsible for his environment."

"You haven't answered my question," Gannon said.

Her chin came up. "I think he rode off with Burac someplace."

Gannon tried to hide his sudden start. "Do you know if he's got a pair of elkhide boots with red stars embroidered on their calves?"

It was Tennessee's turn to start. "You mean those boots that were on Tulare?"

"How'd you know they were on Tulare?"

She drew back as from a blow, the knuckles of one hand pressed against her lips; eyes wide.

"You saw them on him, didn't you, just before Hallet came across you riding off the Del Shay trail?"

Even as he asked the question, Cash saw as in a flash the real reason for Shorty Hallet's death. His sharp glance watched the color pass from

(Continued On Page 94)

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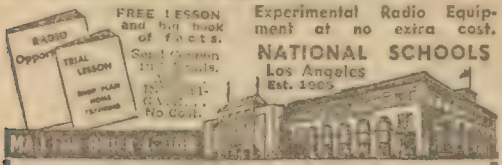

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(Continued From Page 93)

Tennessee's cheeks. His temper lifted wickedly. He said harshly: "Hadn't you better tell the truth about that ride?"

Narrowed lids shut off her thoughts completely.

He put on his hat and wheeled away.

His mind worked swiftly as, stiff-backed, he swung to the saddle. Tug might not have planned this raid any more than he had planned that other, less disastrous, one. Autwine might have planned them both in an effort to force Gannon's hand, knowing as he did Gannon's position as the pawn of Governor Blanford.

But Autwine, dead, would talk no more; there'd be no determining the matter exactly. Not that he would need determine it; too many other pieces had fallen into place. The pattern was nearly finished. Tug's boots had been placed on Tulare for the same reason that Tulare's boots had been left at Bristol's and the murder blade concealed in Candalero's drawer: to divert suspicion from the killer. Three men, each for highly personal reasons, had been intent on marrying Tennessee: Autwine, Rago and Candalero. Only Candalero was alive.

There remained but one small thing for him to do before going after the Hackberry killer. He must check Tug's alibi once again with Shoemaker—there must be left no single loophole for the killer to wriggle through.

CHAPTER XXII

The Sheriff Rides

GANNON stood in the dry wash bed and passed his careful scrutiny across the dreary hovels that made up this Red Rock post. There was an utter stillness about the place: an air of desertion that even the brilliance of the morning's sunlight could not dispel.

He raised his voice in a shouted hail, and waited. But only the dimming echoes of that sound came back.

He put his horse up the crumbled bank and slid from the saddle before

the store. He crossed the sagging veranda, his spurs raking tiny melodies from the blistered boards. He stood a moment, staring into the mealy shadows beyond the doorless entrance; seeing no sign of movement, but with his ears attuned to an off-key sound that had a patent, universal meaning.

He went forward then, through the gaping doorway into the inside dimness and the flies that rose in droning protest from the disordered chaos of opened tins and kicked-apart sacks.

He picked his way among the debris, going straight back to the partitioned-off section at the rear. As he had more than half suspected, there were Shoemaker's breeds sleeping off the effects of their orgy. Shoemaker's squaw snored with them, her mouth opening and shutting for all the world like the trap of a ground-hole spider.

Gannon shook the oldest breed awake; shook him till his buck teeth chattered and comprehension showed in the tightening of his red-rimmed eyes. "Where's Shoemaker?"

"Shoemaker no here!" grunted the squaw, rolling to an elbow and walling sleep-fuddled eyes about her. She recognized the sheriff and broke into a guttural cursing.

The oldest boy said: "Ol' man gone. Squaw all-same sore like broke-back rattler."

"Where'd he go?"

But the breed boy was all through talking. He spread his hands in an elaborate shrug and stared at Gannon sullenly.

GANNON went morosely back to his horse and climbed up into the saddle. He thought of Burac, exploring such known facts as concerned him. Then he remembered Pritchett's words. "If I was sure that I was right, I'd kill the little rat," Pritchett had grunted.

Gannon kicked the spurs in—hard.

He saw now why the girl had reacted as she had. Saw what her stained kerchief had been doing beside Tulare's body; understood the reason for her hurry in getting away from the Del Shay trail that night!

(Continued On Page 96)

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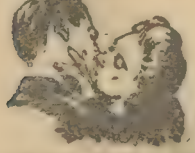
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Western Action

(Continued From Page 95)

Hell's hinges, what a fool he'd been! He had seen last night the truthful purpose in Hallet's death. Publicly the rancher had admitted being on the Del Shay trail that fatal night near the spot and at just about the time of Tulare's killing. In the presence of Candalero, Rago, Tug, Calhoun and Burac he'd told Gannon:

"Tennessee Jordan was jest turnin' into that trail that passes the nester's —" And Vic Rago had broken in to growl: "Comin' off Del Shay?" And Hallet had answered "Yes!"

He'd been killed because of the very plain possibility that he had known too much! That his light hadn't been snuffed even sooner had been strictly due to chance. Either the killer had been kept too busy, or he'd been waiting until kind circumstance should render Hallet's going more probably the result of other causes.

And all this time, Tennessee—who must know or guess at least as much as Hallet—had been left unguarded!

Gannon's forward-canted body suddenly stiffened in the saddle. "Good God! That voice!"

He'd recalled in that tautened moment where he'd met the man before. He saw now in exactly what capacity Kelstane Burac fitted this gargantuan maze of trickery and violence!

He must get to Pritchett quick!

CHAPTER XXIII

Neither Hell Nor High Water—

GANNON rode without regard for trails or brush. One thing only loomed important—time! Each fleeting instant breathed the pattern plainer; each passing moment saw the ghastly cycle creeping nearer to completion. But a single life hung in the balance. He must reach Pritchett and call a halt to this mad carnage before that life was lost!

Seven miles below the Jordan ranch headquarters he sighted the camp movers of the sheep crowd. He slammed among them, pulling his lathered bronc back on its haunches.

"The boss!" he cried. "El Patron! Where the hell is Pritchett?"

They stared blankly. Then a flat-faced Yaqui said: "You are look for Senor Pritchett?"

Gannon's "Yes!" was an impatient sound.

"Why," the man said in Spanish, "he heard the Jordan girl had gone to the nesterman's shack, and he took his horse and went over to see if it were true."

"How long ago?"

"Quien sabe? Mebbe twenty-thirty minutes."

Gannon groaned. Tennessee at Bristol's and Pritchett hurrying after her—and with a start like that! The breath snarled out of him wickedly. He drove a searching look about to see if there was a horse here better suited to his needs than the half-spent one beneath his saddle. But there was not.

The thrum of hoofs burst across a rise. Gannon swung his head about and saw the Jordan cook come tearing down a pitch waving a fluttering yellow envelope showing like a banner. But the wind tore his words away and Gannon could not wait.

He knew the killer, anyway; the problem was to head him off!

"God—" he prayed; "make this bronc last out!"

BUT across the basin he sent the plunging bay at an angle designed to cut Chalk Mountain's trail close to the nester's shack. Back of him larruped the Jordan cook, plying both quirt and spur.

Gannon had no thought of the Governor now. His pact with Big Joe Blanford had been broken the moment those feud guns barked, and it was a foregone conclusion that a price would be on his head as soon as Blanford heard the news. But to hell with that—he could take his medicine if they caught up with him. Right now his every thought was geared to Tennessee's danger. Her safety was a precious thing.

The bay was running less smoothly now. Stringers of foam were beginning to fleck the knees and legs of Gannon's levis, the animal's breath

(Continued On Page 98)

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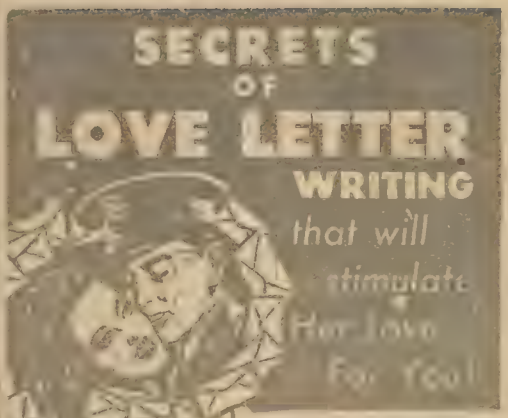

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 97)

was a hoarse, hard sound, and a lurch was creeping into its stride.

But he was halfway across the tangent now; there was a long-odds chance the horse might last.

Easing up a little, he thrust a backward look across his shoulder, discovering Jordan's cook a boiling dust three miles behind.

Gannon cursed when his head swung front again.

A man had stepped from a scrub oak thicket. There was a rifle at his shoulder. The man was Burac, with a dark scowl twisting his bitter features.

Flame spurted from the rifle's tube. Gannon hugged the bay's long neck and did not swerve. His only chance lay in closing the distance quickly. He had no rifle and unless he could get this horse into a six-gun range he was finished.

Again flame licked from Burac's rifle. It made a wicked, steadily-cracking sound that drove right through the thud of the game bay's hoofs. A slug tore whining through the crown of Gannon's hat. He felt the next one's impact. The bay was hit and plunging.

Gannon kicked loose of the stirrups. He came out of the saddle a pulsing second before the bay went crashing hoofs over head to its death.

He lit on breaking bootheels, both pistols out and rocking against his palms. Panic raised its hell with Burac's aim. But not with Gannon's. His second shot knocked the burly rancher sprawling.

Mouthing curses, Burac came to an elbow, a belt gun spouting from his fist. A slug tore Gannon's hat away. Another tugged his vest. Then Burac came straight up on his haunches and hung that way with bulging eyes while the blood ran down his face and his exploding gun punched pits in the sand before him. His nerves went slack and dropped him in a crumpled heap.

With shaking hands Gannon shoved fresh cartridges in his guns. Reaction was threatening to have its remembered way with him, and it took the full reserves of the strength built up by his clean living to combat

it. He was aided by grim thoughts of Tennessee's danger.

He raked an urgent glance aprowl to hunt for Burac's horse.

Quartering the brush that lined the trail's far side, Gannon maneuvered to a point that gave him view of Bristol's yard. No horses stood before the shack. An air of utter quiet hung over it. The shake-built door stood open.

"Too late!" The thought ran through his mind with bitter irony.

Then, looking about the yard with a closer scrutiny, he tensed; the breath whistling shrilly through his teeth. Over there a man was sprawled in the grass. He lay partially on his side with his twisted back toward the trail. But Gannon knew him.

It was Bristol, and he had no further need of Tulare's boots.

The plain fact stiffened Gannon, turned his breathing small and slow.

Carefully he crept in closer till the open door stood straight in front. But the light inside the shack was poor; dark compared to the brilliant light thrown by the sun across the yard.

It was in Gannon's mind the man he sought was in there. This lack of horses could be explained in several ways; most likely the shot that had dropped Bristol had frightened them and they'd bolted.

Warily, flesh cringing from the expected rip of lead, Gannon crossed the trail and stepped into Bristol's yard. A growing sense of disaster tightened its hold upon his muscles. Ten feet from the open door he stopped, rooted in his tracks.

He could see inside there now. And he saw Pritchett....

Tennessee's shrill cry unlocked his muscles. He dashed forward, dragging at his guns.

CHAPTER XXIV

The String Runs Out

"JENNINGS! Drop that knife!"

Even as he crossed the threshold, Gannon's comprehending glance had raked the evidence of this room. Pritchett, hacked and bloody,

(Continued On Page 100)

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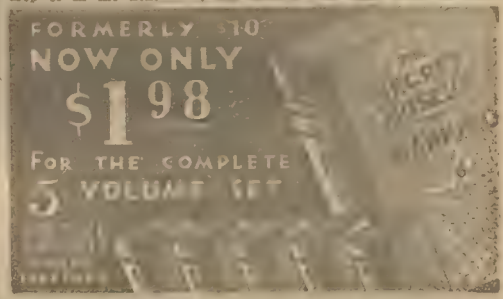

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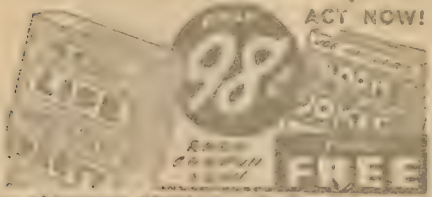

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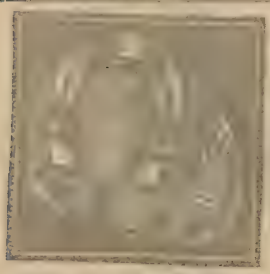

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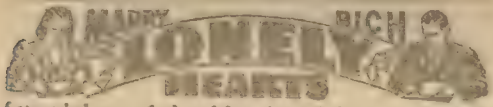

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 99)

lay spread-eagled and unmoving amid the wreckage of the table. Tennessee, wide-eyed and frightened, stood backed against a wall, hands spread out to either side of her, watching with a terrible fascination the stealthy advance of that dread figure with the dripping knife.

A breathless moment crowded the heels of Gannon's words. The killer's back was toward him; stiff, bent, frozen where the command had hit him.

But it would not stay that way long.

Gannon took a deep breath. "The jig's up, Tug. You better play this easy—"

But Tug knew where he stood too well to heed that admonition. He dropped the knife with a gritted curse and whipped his torso clear around, right hand stabbing for the brass-studded holster at his groin. There was a flash of gleaming metal as the hand came up. But not until Tug's squeezing finger loosed a spurt of flame did Gannon move. Then his left hand gun roared once.

With a bullet through his hip Tug crashed against the wall, slid down it to a sullen heap. His sobbed curses went unheard among the pounding echoes. But his eyes gleamed baleful as a cornered rat's and Gannon know he aimed to go out with his boots on.

When Tug got his six-gun balanced on a twisted knee Gannon had no choice. It was him or Tug. Their guns roared simultaneously, and when the smoke cleared away Tug lay there without movement.

HOOFS ceased their faltered drumming on the hard-pan of the road. A rider's boots hit gravel, scattered it, and came a-clumping across the yard.

It was the Jordan cook. He came in with bulging eyes, the telegram forgotten in his hand. He gulped and ran his tongue across parched lips. "By Gawd, it looks like you was right," he muttered, staring at the shambles. "Tug really did it, did he?"

Gannon nodded wearily. "Let's see that wire." He held a hand out.

But the cook thrust the envelope behind him. "Hold on. I want to know how you come to figure it was Tug."

"It was simple enough," said Gannon grimly, "once I got around to figuring that Tulare instead of Jordan was the first man killed. It was Pritchett that really clinched things for me. He was a man who used his eyes. For a while I thought he was the killer. Then yesterday he chucked out some information he'd been holding back. He said the killer had been at the scene of Tulare's murder twice that night; that it was his opinion Tulare'd had his light blown first.

"That set me thinking. I recalled the obvious weakness of Tug's alibi for the night of Candalero's party. I remembered that his first alibi had been admittedly a downright lie. Then I got to thinking about the boots with the telltale heel—Tug's boots, by every indication. I questioned Tennessee about them; saw in her reaction that they were Tug's."

"But why in hell would a man want to plant his own boots—?"

"He had to get rid of them someway," Gannon said, "as soon as he discovered they were leaving sign. He didn't discover it, though, until after he'd killed King Jordan and packed him to the house. Coming out, I figure he must have stopped to light a smoke or something and saw that track on the floorboards of the porch. He knew then he had to get shut of those boots quick. His best bet was to put 'em on Tulare. Then, if no one noticed they weren't the sheepman's, Tulare would be blamed for Jordan's death, and folks would think one of Jordan's punchers had got wise and paid the killer back. It was when Tug was on his way to put the boots on Tulare, after killing and packing home Jordan, that I met him. He was coming from the Box O D and he was traveling in a damn' big hurry. He wanted to get those boots on the sheepman before somebody found—"

"But, hell's hinges! If you met him on the trail—"

"I didn't know him then," Gannon pointed out, "and besides it was

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

darker than sixty where we did our talking. I asked him the way to the Jordan spread and he motioned along his back-trail. When I remembered where I'd heard his voice before I knew he was the killer. The weight of evidence was against him. I was recalling Hallet's death. Hallet had been too close to the scene of Tulare's killing at the fatal time. Tug couldn't take any chances; he killed him to shut his mouth."

Gannon reflected for a moment. "This stuff," he said, "all came to me kind of gradual—a little hint here, another one there. Not until last night did I see the true reason for Hallet's death. I got to thinking then it might be a good idea to check Tug's alibi again. So I hotfooted it down to Red Rock. But when I got there this morning Shoemaker had already headed for the tulles.

"That just about clinched things. It seemed to me there could only be two reasons for Shoemaker clearing out that way; either he was the killer, or else he knew who the killer was. If he wasn't the killer, then he was afraid the killer might take a notion to stop his mouth the way he'd just stopped Hallet's."

"BUT if Tug was the killer, he was dependin' on Shoemaker to alibi him, wasn't he?" the cook protested. "Why in hell should he go—"

"He was depending on Shoemaker, yes; but he must have known what a weak reed Shoemaker was," said Gannon. "Shoemaker had been questioned by me once, and Tug knew the trader's backing left plenty to be desired. He must have reasoned that I'd question the man again; Shoemaker must have sensed that, too. He pulled his freight while the pulling was still good.

"As I stood there this morning thinking these things over, I saw the danger to Tennessee. She had seen or heard at least as much as Hallet on that fatal night. The killer would know it, too. It was only a question of time and opportunity till he'd be going after her, same as he'd gone for Hallet. Then I recalled where I'd

heard Tug's voice before—that night on the trail, you know. And I saw right then that Kelstane Burac, another possibility in my mind for the role of killer, could have had no direct bearing on the killings; that my consideration of him had only been confusing the issue. I knew then definitely that young Tug was the man I had to go for."

"But what did Tug kill Tulare for, anyhow? And why did he kill King Jordan?" the cook demanded. "Old King was jest like a daddy to him!"

"He killed Tulare because Tulare was boss of the sheep crowd, and sheep to Tug were the same as a red rag to a bull. Tennessee had told me that; and Tug had been brought up by old King Jordan, himself a hater of sheep. But I'll say frankly I think Tug had a screw loose—"

"What made you send that telegram? You must have been pretty sure it was Tug last night."

"Yeah. I was pretty sure. But I had no proof; it was mostly hunch and guesswork then. After that fight with the sheepmen yesterday, I came across Rago dying. Tennessee's mother—" he looked at the girl compassionately, "had been visiting him, and he'd sent her home with a cock-and-bull story about Tennessee not wanting to see her. You knew your mother was here?" he asked the girl.

"She had never been to see me but once—about eight years ago. If I had known she was here I'd have gone to her at once—"

"What I want to know," the cook interrupted, "is what made you send that telegram."

"I sent it because, while talking with Rago, Vic had let something drop about Tug not being any Jordan. He mentioned Texas and the name of Jennings. It got me thinking. I sent that telegram because I couldn't afford to pass up any bets."

"Well, you sure wrung a ringer," the cook said. "Read it!"

Gannon took the unsealed envelope, spread its message across a knee. It said: *Bob Jennings convicted murder Toyah Lake sheep king..Died asylum for criminally insane. Had phobia connected sheep believed transmitted*

(Continued On Page 104)

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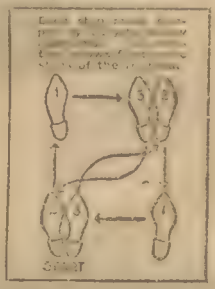

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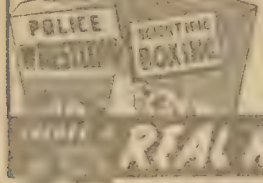

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 103)

son adopted from orphanage by Samuel Jordan.

Gannon creased the paper with unseeing eyes. With a sigh he thrust it in a pocket and looked at Tennessee without hope.

"You ain't told us," the cook persisted, "about how come Tug to kill Jordan. Accordin' to that telegram he had even more to thank the old man for than just givin' him a good home an'—"

"Tug killed Jordan because he come onto King under suspicious circumstances. I think Tug had just killed Tulare when someone's coming scared him off—"

"It was me," the girl said wearily. "Twice I'd seen him spying on the sheep camp and I knew the way his mind was working. I was afraid he was headed for their camp when he left the rest of us on the way to Candalero's. I made an excuse and went pounding after him. But I lost the trail. After wasting precious time trying to relocate it, I cut across country, heading directly toward the camp. I came into the Del Shay trail at the very spot where Tulare had fallen. And he was still alive. But he wasn't conscious. I dropped down beside him, trying to stop the blood. When I realized he was dead I got panicky; all I could think of was to get away from that place quick."

"YES," Gannon said. "That's how come you left your handkerchief. When you scared Tug away he must have run smack into your Dad. And it must have been close by. He was afraid of what the old man might have seen or heard. I expect he was pretty panicky himself by that time. He stabbed Jordan and packed him home. Then he realized his boots had been leaving tracks and he went dashing back to put those boots on Tulare. What I can't understand is why King left the rest of you, and what he came to be doing so close to the murder."

"He'd been suspicious of Tug for some time, I think," Tennessee explained. "We'd heard rumors about Tug's gambling. Dad was very set

(Continued On Page 106)

SURE, that Saturday night pay envelope's bulging. But let me tell you something, brother, before you spend a dime . . . *That money's mine too!*

I can take it. The mess out here. And missing my wife and kid.

What I *can't* take is you making it tougher for me. Or my widow, if that's how it goes. And, brother, it *will* make it tough—if you splurge one dime tonight.

You're working . . . and *I'm fighting* . . . for the same thing. But *you* could lose it for both of us—without thinking. A guy like you could start bidding me right out of the picture tonight. And my wife and kid. There not being as much as everybody'd like to buy—and you having more green stuff than I. But remember this, brother—everything you buy helps to send prices kiting. Up. UP. AND UP. Till that fat pay envelope can't buy you a square meal.

Stop spending. For yourself. *Your* kids. And mine. That, brother, is sense. Not sacrifice.

Know what I'd do with that dough . . . if I'd the luck to have it?

I'd buy War Bonds—and, God, would *I* hang on to them! (Bonds buy guns—and give you four bucks for your three!) . . . I'd pay back that insurance loan from when Mollie had the baby . . . I'd pony up for taxes cheerfully (knowing they're the cheapest way to pay for this war) . . . I'd sock some in the savings bank, while I could . . . I'd lift a load off my mind with more life insurance.

And I wouldn't buy a shoelace till I'd looked myself square in the eye and knew I couldn't do without. (You get to knowin'—out here—what you can do without.)

I wouldn't try to profit from this war—and I wouldn't ask more for anything I had to sell.

I've got your future in my rifle hand, brother. But you've got both of ours, in the inside of that stuffed-up envelope. You and all the other guys that are lookin' at the Main Street shops tonight.

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(Continued From Page 104)

against it, and when Tug left the rest of us that day, I think Dad believed he was going some place to gamble. I believe he followed him, determined to catch him in the act. He must have heard the shot that killed Tulare. I heard it myself; it was what directed me to the spot."

"But what was it made you suspect Tug?" Gannon asked. "Had he ever talked to you about his hatred of sheep and sheepmen?"

"Hundreds of times. I think it must have preyed on his mind incessantly, especially in the last few months. He grew noticeably worse after Tulare's crowd came into the upper Basin."

"I can't get that boot business outa my head," the cook said bewilderedly. "It still don't seem to me like no man with a gram of sense would put his own boots on a fella he'd jest killed."

"You must remember," Gannon explained, "that Tug, when he discovered that his boots were leaving sign, had to get rid of them in a hurry. No matter what he did with them, if anyone came across them he knew they could sooner or later be traced directly back to him. Tug was smart enough to figure that in another person's mind the fact that his boots were on Tulare would be pretty good reason that he'd not killed the sheepman; that the boots had been deliberately planted. He tried to strengthen that impression later by planting Tulare's boots on Bristol, and by planting the murder knife on Candalero."

The cook shook his head. "Why didn't you tell us you thought young Tug was the killer?" he asked Tennessee.

The girl sighed. "I wasn't sure—and—and I was hoping awfully hard he wasn't."

"You were even willing to marry Rago for his sake."

She nodded wearily. "You must remember I was pretty attached to Tug. Oh, I knew he was weak, and petty, and wilful—who could know those things better than I? But we were practically raised together; two children, playing the same games,

(Continued On Page 108)

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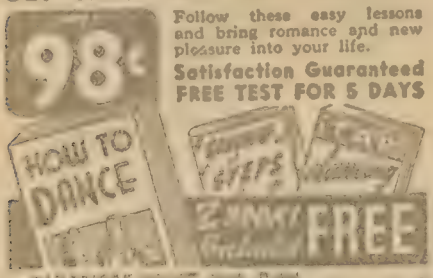

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(Continued From Page 106)

sharing the same pleasures and disappointments, having the same adventures. I was always getting him out of scrapes; it had become a sort of habit. He came to me every time he got in trouble. So when he told me about his gambling with Rago and those I. O. U.'s and all, it only seemed the natural thing for me to become engaged to Rago until such time as Tug could pay the fellow off. Besides, you see, I knew how much store Dad set by Tug, and how he'd always wanted a boy so bad to carry on his name and take over the ranch when he dropped the reins. And—"

"I expect we understand," Gannon said.

"But weren't you scared," the cook asked curiously, "when Hallet said he'd seen you comin' off the Del Shay trail that night?"

She shok her head. "It never entered my mind that Tug would be afraid of me."

"Well, you'd ort to have told the Sheriff about suspicioning Tug—"

"I know. I was going to once, but he wasn't here. Then after that I just couldn't. I'd been protecting Tug too long, I guess."

The cook snorted. Muttering something under his breath, he turned and started toward the door. "I expect," he said, "somebody better be huntin' up the boys."

"I'm sorry—" Gannon began when they were left alone.

But she said quickly: "It's nothing you need be sorry for. I've been deluding myself too long. Tug wasn't bad—not the Tug I knew, that is; the old Tug. But he was weak and wilful and selfish. I'd let him impose on me so long there just didn't seem anything else for me to do. . ."

"Well, I'm glad you're not going to take the business too hard. I'd like to leave here," he said wistfully, "knowing there weren't any hard feelings between us, and—"

"Leave? You're not going to leave—"

"What else?" He made an impatient gesture with his shoulders. "I've made a holy mess of things. Blanford sent me down here to stop

(Continued On Page 110)

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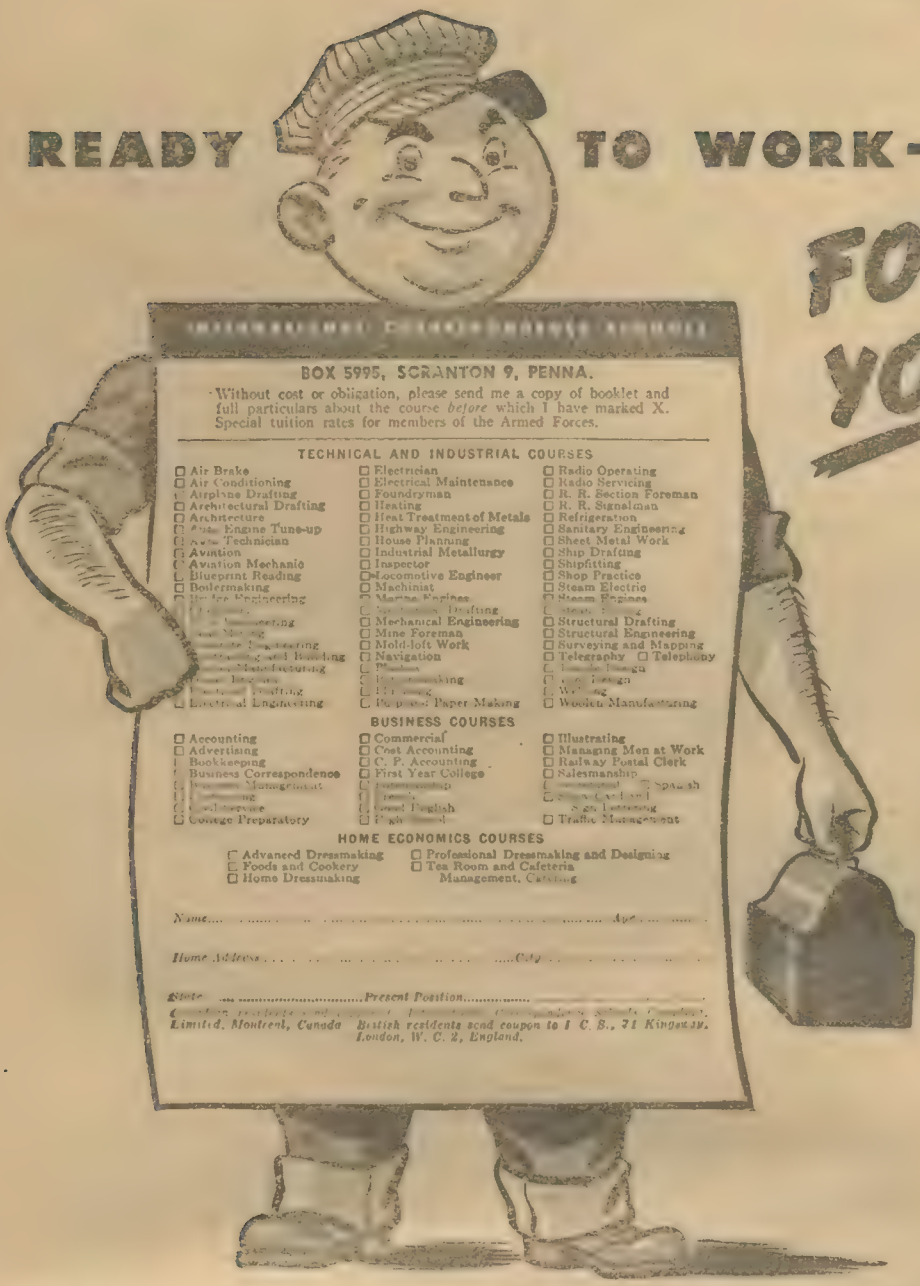

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 108)

the trouble between these sheep and cattle—"

"BUT you have stopped it!" she said quickly.

"Yeah." Gannon's tone was dry; his grin twisted. "I've stopped it," he said bitterly, "but not in a way that'll get me decorated with any medals. There've been too many fellows killed—not to mention the ones young Tug rubbed out. Blanford ain't goin' to count many votes gotten him by my handlin' of this business." He shook his head. "I've got to drift."

Tennessee looked at him for a long and silent moment. She said, "If you're leaving because of what the Governor had on you about that Freestone affair—"

"Well, that's a pretty good reason, ain't it?"

She pulled a newspaper clipping from her pocket, passed it to him. "Don't you ever read the papers? Better look this over."

Gannon looked. And whistled. "So he didn't kick off after all," he murmured thoughtfully. "That makes Blanford out a pretty plain—"

"How did you come to shoot the man?" Tennessee interrupted. "It says in that article that you were working for him."

"I was. But it come out kinda sudden one day that he was brother to a party I had to shoot one time when I was sheriffin' down at Pecos. This Freestone bird had the notion there'd ought to be some change comin' back on that deal. He flashed a gun on me and I seen a look in his eye that told me he meant business. So I reached for my own gun. I didn't have much time for aimin'; I just jerked it out an' let 'er rip. I saw how he'd get the deck stacked before he did his dyin', so I lit out on the first horse north. I went straight to Blanford with the story. He told me he was sorry but the man had died; I could take this job of sheriffing or I could go before a jury on that killin'."

She said, "But the Freestone ranch-

(Continued On Page 112)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 110)

er didn't die, so you can forget all that stuff now."

He said "Yes," and looked at her oddly.

She kind of blushed and said, "I was a little fool, wasn't I?—Just like you said I was—"

"We both been fools, I guess," he said. "And I was almighty stubborn, not wantin' to do the way you asked me—"

But she said swiftly: "Do you think I could have loved you the way I do if you had given in?"

He looked down at her sharply. The next moment she was in his arms.

Long moments later Gannon said, "I reckon you'll be wantin' to see your mother. I expect we'll be able to locate her—after all, Phoenix ain't such a whale of a big place, an'—"

"Do you think," she asked, interrupting him, "it's big enough to boast a parson?"

THE END

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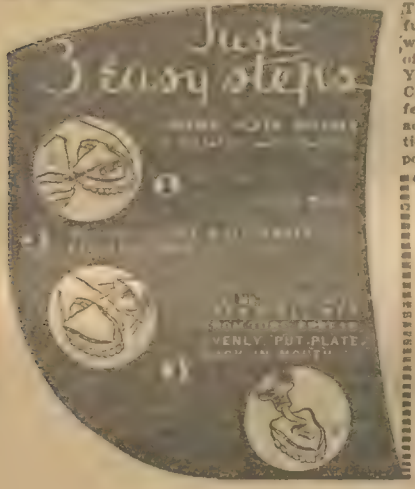

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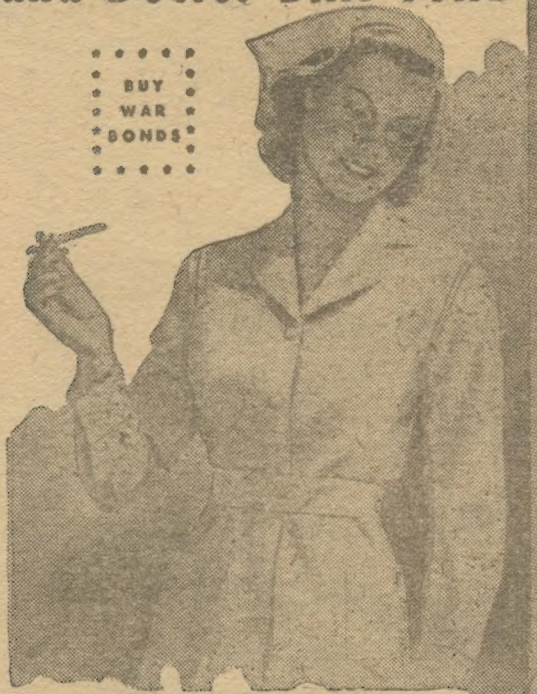

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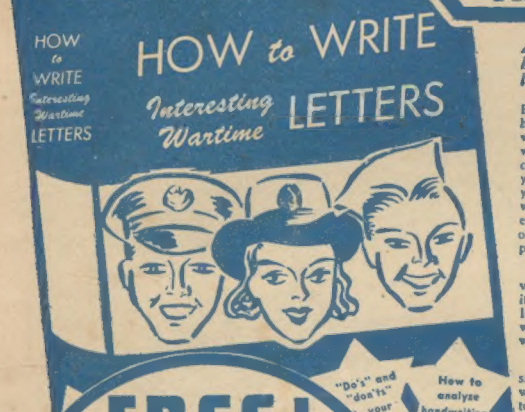

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